BOBBI
SCHEMERHORN
MECHANICAL
DRAGONS
FIRE & WATER

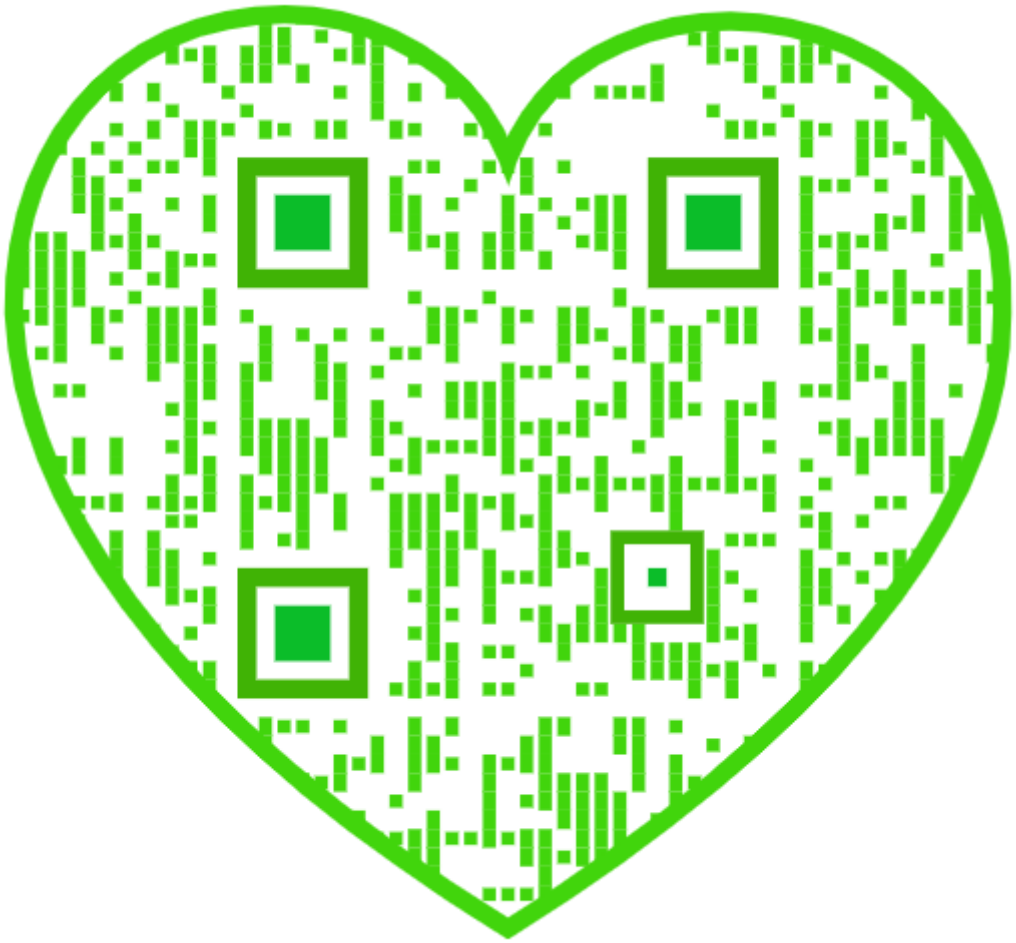

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
CHAPTER NINETEEN
CHAPTER TWENTY
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
EPILOGUE
AUTHOR'S NOTE

Bobbi Schemerhorn

MECHANICAL DRAGONS

FIRE & WATER

BOOK ONE

Mechanical Dragons: Fire and Water

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OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

Mechanical Dragons Series

Fire and Water

Spirit

Earth

Air

Reunion

Realm Wardens Series

Blood Magic

The Gift

Tor

Young Chronicles

Darkness Looms

Standalone Titles

Bounty

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Welcome to the world of Usmiri.

CHAPTER ONE

She was banished to the stool in the corner of the room, left to watch over the activities in her father's robotics lab. Khaly was told to remain there and keep out of trouble.

"Hmph, keep out of trouble," she mumbled to herself.

She always came to his lab after school, since she was a small child. She and her father would walk home together and share their day. He would tell her about all the wonderful inventions they were working on, and she would tell him about her day spent learning and playing with her friends.

Even now, after moving to Vlarlee, the biggest city on the Feesia continent, so she could attend the prestigious Pifianka Academy of Polytechnics, they continued this tradition. But it was different when she was younger. Khaly had been allowed to wander the lab, question the assistants, and work with the robotics. The staff enjoyed answering her questions and sharing their own knowledge in the field.

At seventeen it wasn't cute anymore, with her knowledge and skills far surpassing their own. They were put out by her constantly correcting their mistakes. To them she was a child overstepping her bounds by assuming she knew more, which she did.

She watched in sheer agony while they poked and prodded at the inner workings of their newest project. When they tried running their tests the tiny man would lurch to one side then tip over, so they poked and prodded some more. It walked in circles. On another try it did nothing but open and close its mouth, or its head spun in circles. They ran their computer simulations, tested the software, and inspected the hardware, but never made headway.

The discussion between the two lab workers was growing more and more agitated with each test. They had been working on this little mechanical man for almost two months, and Khaly was ready to crawl out of her own skin to fix it.

“Well, maybe it’s your ineptitude on the inner workings of this kind of mechanics that’s the problem,” Arledge said to his coworker.

The young woman bit her lip, preventing her response to his accusations. Khaly also gritted her teeth. Many of the suggestions Chahara, the assistant, was making certainly would have gotten them further along. Even though her assumptions were mostly wrong, they still would have made more progress. Khaly nibbled on a fingernail and squirmed in her chair; she wanted to walk over and fix it. It was a minor issue really, one she could correct in her sleep. She couldn’t understand how they weren’t seeing it.

“What course of action would you like to take now?” the assistant said, giving a little more attitude than she should have. The supervisor shot her a glare. “Well, none of my suggestions seem to be the correct solution. I, of course, would defer to your guidance.” Chahara gave a fleeting smile.

Wow, she must really want this job. I would throttle the guy, Khaly thought.

“Yes, well, this is a team project. I was merely looking for your input,” he said. “But it’s obvious that you have nothing to offer.” He stood, trying to look as though he was silently solving the issue of the robot.

“Maybe, sir, we could go over the schematics one more time. Perhaps there is something we missed in the design,” Chahara said.

“*We?*” He quirked an eyebrow at her.

“I meant to say I; maybe *I* missed something.”

“Right. Yes, that is a more likely scenario.” As he turned to go over the schematics Khaly almost said something, but Chahara caught her eye and gave a wordless command to stay silent.

Khaly pursed her lips. She had had about all she could take. They were wasting time. It could be solved in a matter of minutes. She knew her father was under a lot of pressure to get this prototype to work. With each passing day he worried his career would be put in jeopardy.

The two pored over the blueprints. The assistant pointed and drew with her finger, offering suggestions. Arledge brushed her hand away as he shook his head.

She was unable to contain herself any longer. “Maybe if you checked the

sensors," Khaly said. "They may be calibrated too high and the processing core can't compensate."

He glared at her. Khaly meekly smiled back and shrugged her shoulders.

"Just a suggestion, really. I'm sure I'm not right." She tried to reassure him.

He returned to the schematics as if deep in thought, tracing his finger over the circuits of the robot. He turned back to his assistant and pointed at a spot on the blueprint.

"Check to see if the sensors are calibrated too high. Then make sure the processing core is compensating."

"Yes, sir," she said giving a tiny smile to Khaly as she turned.

Khaly thought to herself, *That isn't the processing core he's pointing to, that's the actuator*. She shook her head.

They made her changes and started testing once again. The man clunked and lurched forward only to tip once more.

Arledge looked back at her smugly. "I'm not surprised you were wrong. Just because you go to the Pifianka Academy doesn't make you an expert in this field. I've been doing this for twenty years and have no reason to listen to the likes of you," he said, his frustration evident by his reddening face. The lab assistant's mouth dropped open at his reaction. It was one thing to yell at *her*, but completely unacceptable to yell at Khaly.

"They're still too high," Khaly mumbled.

"What was that?" he yelled. "You irksome little child!"

"I said," she yelled, louder than she needed to, "They. Are. Still. Too. High."

"You don't know—" He was abruptly cut off by a hand on his shoulder.

"Sir," Chahara whispered. "She's right. They're still a little too high, but the processing core we have will never be able to handle the sensors no matter how low we set them. We'll likely have to build one ourselves."

His face reddened again, but he didn't offer an apology.

Edwin, Khaly's father, joined them. "So, how is everything coming along? Any progress?"

"Yes, sir. I have discovered that the sensors were running too high for the core to compensate. But when I lowered them, I found that the core won't be able to compensate at all. We need to get a faster one." Khaly wasn't surprised that

Arledge took all the credit for their discoveries, and from Chahara's face it was evident she wasn't either.

"Ah, I see." Edwin rubbed his chin, looking over the little robot man. "Well, it's too late to put in any orders tonight."

"Ah, sir—" Chahara started, but was cut short.

"I'm sorry, sir. I meant to mention that I will have to build it on my own."

"Fine then, in the morning," Edwin said. "You two ladies could learn a thing or two from this man. You're in the presence of a true genius." Edwin patted Arledge on the shoulder. "Let's go, Khaly. We're already late for dinner. I'm sure your mother is worried."

Khaly jumped off her stool, grinding her teeth at the smirk on Arledge's face. "I'm sure she is more pissed than worried, Father."

"Language, Khaly. Language," he scolded.

"Do you disagree with me?"

"No, I think you're right, but such language isn't necessary."

Khaly put her arm through her father's as they left the lab. Once they cleared the building and stepped out onto the sidewalk Khaly asked, "Father, what happens if Arledge and Chahara can't get that robot to work?"

He looked down at her. "My dear girl, don't you worry about that. I'm certain they will be able to sort out all the problems and meet the deadline in time."

"But what if they can't?"

There was a long, grim silence.

"Father?" she asked.

"Let's not worry about that. I'm certain it will get sorted out."

Khaly knew exactly what that meant. If they don't build the proper core in time, her father would be out of a job. There was no way Arledge would know where to start and she was unsure of Chahara's skills. She was going to have to do something about that. She would have to get into the lab and work on it when no one was around. It was the only way.

CHAPTER TWO

The little mechanical alarm rang through the room. Khaly woke, grabbed at her creation, and turned it off. She was late and had missed the bus to school.

“Man,” she moaned, scowling at the soon-to-be broken clock. Her sleep had been restless; she had tossed and turned, worrying about her father’s future at the Robotics Department. It rested solely in Arledge’s hands. His inept, useless hands.

Throwing her legs over the edge of her bed, she wiped the remaining sleep from her eyes. Yawning and stretching, she pushed herself up and stumbled about the semi-dark room, looking for clothes to wear. She grabbed her bag off the back of her desk chair, and tripped out of her room with her shoes in the other hand.

As she hurriedly made her way down the stairs, she missed two and slid down the rest of the way on her butt. Her mother came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel.

“Khaly?” She rounded the banister to find Khaly on the floor. “I thought you left already. What happened?”

“My alarm decided to let me sleep in,” she said dryly as she picked herself up and walked toward the kitchen.

Her mother followed. “Your shirt is on backward, dear.” She pursed her lips to conceal the grin forming.

“Man.” Khaly dropped her bag and shoes so she could turn her shirt around. “Can you make me some toast?”

“You really should have a better breakfast than that.”

“No time.” She pulled her arms into her shirt to spin it around.

“It’s also inside out.” Now her mother giggled.

With no thought as to where she was, Khaly pulled the shirt off and turned it right side out then put it back on.

The toaster popped as Khaly started to yank her shoes on. “That was quick,” she said.

“This was mine.” Hettie quickly buttered the toast and held both slices out as Khaly grabbed them, planting a quick kiss on her cheek as she went by.

Khaly hit the sidewalk at a quick pace as she shoved the toast in her mouth. Once she was finished, she looped her arm through the other strap of her backpack and took off in an easy run.

She had been on the track team at her old school, and long distance was her best event.

A year ago, when she passed the proper aptitude placement tests, it was highly recommended she go to the Pifianka Academy of Polytechnics.

It was the type of recommendation that wasn’t suggested, but demanded. Individuals showing predilection with certain skills were sent to specific schools for proper training. Khaly scored extremely high on the tests, from Preconscious to English, but she showed the most skill and interest for Robotics. She had been happy and excited to be able to attend the Academy.

Until she arrived.

Khaly quickly discovered she didn’t fit in with anyone. She was a late admission, coming in halfway through the semester, but still able to pass all the tests and exams. She had no issues catching up with the schoolwork and the many projects they were expected to do. At the end of the semester she passed her classes with high honors. Her scores were higher than, and far surpassed, those of the top student, Jahallah Allmond. For this, Jahallah made her suffer.

It was only a week into the new semester of her second year; there were ten months to go, but it already felt like she’d been there for an eternity. Her humor and style differed greatly from the other students, and Khaly missed her old friends desperately. She came from a smaller town, Armskirk, where there was a great deal more camaraderie. It was in the tiny mountain continent of Nylm Hills. The weather was harsher and the climate was cold year-round.

Her mother also felt the difference in their new community, and missed her old friends and family, too. Khaly’s father seemed to be the only one adapting, and he did well at his new job. At least, up until the last few months, when he made supervisor and Arledge came to work for him.

Khaly took the quickest way to the school. There was a forest lining the neighborhood, with a children's playground on the other side. She broke through the tree line with ease. She had used it so often the year before there was now a small path beaten down.

Khaly ducked under low branches and jumped easily over downed logs. It only took her a few minutes to come out on the other side. The grass was wet with the morning dew, causing her to lose her footing every few steps. The sun was barely in the sky as she got to the top of the hill.

The summer months on the Feesia continent were only comparable to one other in Usmiri. Of the four, there was only one desert continent. Aelborne. Its nights were as hot as its days. The only difference in Feesia was summer nights were covered in rain.

As Khaly descended the hill, she opted to run around the playground instead of through it; the dirt had turned to mud during last night's showers.

Khaly reached the front doors of the school having barely broken a sweat, although she was breathing somewhat heavy. Pulling the doors open, she stepped through to find the halls empty. Completely deserted.

"Man."

Ignoring the no-running-in-the-halls rule, she jogged to her class, hoping the door wasn't locked.

Khaly slowed, quieting her steps as she reached the door. Peeking through the small window she glimpsed the teacher with his back to the class. She quietly turned the handle until she felt the pressure release from the latch. She pulled the door open and slid in. The students in the room took notice of her; Mr. Metayer, however, did not.

"Hello, Khaly." Jahallah announced her arrival. "Sleep in again?"

She loathed Jahallah Allmond, the source of her misery. Jahallah smirked when Mr. Metayer turned.

"It's good to see you, Ms. Hamons. Please take your seat."

"Yes, sir." As she passed Jahallah's desk, Khaly's toe caught the girl's sudden outstretched leg. She caught herself before falling, and ended up doing a fast double-step instead. Jahallah and her friends giggled.

"Ladies, settle down." Mr. Metayer set a calm, steady gaze on them, impelling

them to silence.

Khaly took her usual spot at the back of the class, dropped her bag on the floor, and slumped onto her stool. She glared at the back of Jahallah's head with such severity it could have exploded.

"All right, my little eggheads," Mr. Metayer said as he clapped and rubbed his hands together. "We are a week into the new semester and it's time to assign partners for the new school project." He smiled wide, showing his teeth. "The remainder of your professors will assign the corresponding projects as the week goes by. Today, my lucky little prodigies, you'll be placed with your new best friends for the year. So, when I call your names, please gather your belongings and sit together."

As he turned to his sheet of paper, a murmur swept the class. Khaly's stomach clenched uneasily as she took notice of the words *for the year*. Usually these partnerships were only for a semester. She looked forward to these projects. It was the only time she was accepted by the other kids. *Only one partner for a whole year?* She gnawed on her lip, starting to worry about being placed with someone who hated her. Khaly silently prayed she wouldn't be placed with Jahallah or any of her friends.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she was paired with Bancroft Kingsford. He was a new kid. She knew nothing about him except he was late taking the aptitude tests. Much later than her. Khaly really didn't want a partner this semester. She was always the one to carry the workload for these projects, so working alone seemed more reasonable.

Bancroft looked back at Khaly, and his eager look told her he expected her to move to the front of the room where he sat. She refused to budge. He gathered his things and joined her at the back of the class. His smile was polite, but Khaly greeted him with a curt nod. She had no intention of working with him and was going to speak with Mr. Metayer at the end of the class.

As the remainder of the students were paired off and moved to sit with each other, Mr. Metayer watched patiently. The noise levels rose.

"All right, let's settle down." A hush settled over the students as they brought their attention back to the front of the room. "Your project proposals will be due in two weeks. I want a rough sketch of your idea. You'll use this class time to

sort through any issues or concerns you may have with your projects throughout the year."

A hand shot up from the center of the room.

"No, Mr. Stealreaver, you may not skip class if you have no issues to work through," Mr. Metayer answered the unspoken question.

"I had to ask," he said. The class erupted with laughter. Even Khaly smirked.

"I'm certain these projects will not go as smoothly as you think. This is, after all, your last year here. The other professors and I will be expecting a much higher caliber of work from you all. So your final assignment will be carried through the entire year. I'm looking forward to seeing how much you have all progressed."

The hour long class felt much longer as Mr. Metayer gave the parameters of the assignment. When he finally dismissed the class Khaly jumped from her chair, snatched her bag, and made her way to the front.

"Mr. Metayer." She stopped in front of the podium where he stood.

"Yes, Ms. Hamons?" He looked at her with a smile.

"I would prefer to work on my own this year," she said. "I think—"

"Ms. Hamons, I'm afraid I can't allow that. Besides, who would Mr. Kingsford work with? All the other students have partners."

"I'm sure that he would be better off—"

He held up his hand to stop her. "The partners have been chosen. You will work with Mr. Kingsford. I should think that since you are still relatively new here at the Academy you would want to help Mr. Kingsford in adjusting."

"He seems to be adjusting fine to me," Khaly muttered, knowing full well Mr. Metayer was right.

He returned to his paper as the new class began to file into the room. Khaly stepped away from the podium and pushed her way out of the classroom. She glimpsed Bancroft standing at the door. She hoped he was capable of holding up his part of the partnership. He approached her as she walked by, but she didn't slow down. He had to quicken his pace to keep up with her.

"So, uh, I hear you're a real whiz with all this technical electronics and mechanical stuff?" His comment a poor attempt at breaking the ice.

She quirked an eyebrow at him. "You should be, too. How else did you get

into the Academy? Did you walk into the wrong school this morning?" She took a sudden left turn, which caused him to jog to get beside her again.

"No, no. Of course not. Yeah, I get all this stuff. I'm just saying…"

Khaly stopped at a locker and began to work the lock. There was a long, awkward silence as he watched her. Khaly pulled open the door and a mechanical arm flung forward, narrowly missing her face. She sighed and heard giggles from the far end of the hall. Both she and Bancroft looked up to find Jahallah and her small entourage watching intently. She made a mental note to change her locker combination, again. Perhaps she would rig her own trap this time.

"Friends of yours?" he asked, thumbing toward the girls.

"Yeah, we're best buds." She turned back to her locker and exchanged two of the textbooks from her bag.

"I met Jahallah over the summer when we first moved here from Morunfell; she lives down the street from me. She kinda liked me and I told her I had a girlfriend back home. She didn't take the rejection very well. After that she wasn't so nice to me, either." He stopped talking when Khaly just stared at him. "So, we should talk about when we can get together. I would like to get started on our plan right away."

Khaly gave him a quick up and down. "Tomorrow, after class, we can get together and figure out what our project is going to be. Then I'll write up the proposal."

"Okay, tomorrow after class. Where should—"

Turning abruptly, she walked away from him before he could finish his thought.

"All right then, I'll meet you right here."

Khaly picked up her pace to get around the corner faster.

"It was nice meeting you."

She heard him shout after her, but she made no attempt to respond. Khaly readjusted her backpack and hustled to her next class.

CHAPTER THREE

After a week of hallway locker meetings, Khaly and Bancroft decided to meet at Khaly's house. Bancroft showed up at six p.m., as promised. She wasn't fond of the idea of having anyone from school in her home, but after she found out where Bancroft lived this was a more agreeable location.

She was beginning to like her partner more by the minute. He was proving his competence in mechanics, and he had extremely good instincts with software. It looked like she wouldn't have to do everything alone this time. They sat on the back porch, reviewing the proposal she put together the week before.

Bancroft agreed with the majority of her setup, but had some adjustments he wanted to make, other ideas of where they could improve the project. She was intrigued by the fact he actually offered to help.

The sliding door opened and her father came out. "So, I hear you're new at Pifianka Academy," he said as he put down a tray of snacks.

"Yes, sir," Bancroft said. "I don't much like the people though…except for Khaly, of course." He flashed her a smile, and she refrained from rolling her eyes.

"Well, I'm sure Khaly can introduce you to her friends." He smiled and patted his daughter on the shoulder. Khaly cast her eyes down. "She's made so many since we moved here last year." Khaly hoped the silence would tell her father he needed to leave. "Well, I'll let the two of you get back to work."

Bancroft smiled back and watched as her father returned to the house. When the door closed behind him, Bancroft spoke, "I take it he's unaware of the pranks that take place at school."

"What part of the proposal did you want to change?" She quickly diverted the subject.

Bancroft watched her closely. "Where did you move from?"

Khaly sighed inwardly. She knew he meant well, but she really didn't want to

talk about herself. “I think we should just work on the project.” She poked her pencil at the papers in front of her.

“All right.” He turned to his bag, pulling out a folder with drawings of robed men with outstretched arms and balls of light coming from their hands. Khaly squinted to get a better look but Bancroft opened the folder, denying her further exploration. He riffled through a number of rough sketches she couldn’t make out. Then he produced several pages of scribbled notes.

“Here it is. I think we should make something different from what everyone else is making.” He waved his papers as he spoke. “Everyone is designing a standard robot or self-flying contraption. I’m assuming that’s what was covered last semester?”

Khaly pursed her lips in agreement, nodding fervently.

“Right. So, I’ve been working on plans over the summer break. Just after I took my aptitude tests and found out I was coming to the Academy, I did some research on the school. A friend of my dad’s also attended, so I talked to him about what it was like and he told me we would be making our own creations. He and his partner had made this spider thing; he showed me pictures and it was pretty cool. So I thought I would get a jump on working out a project. I love drawing and all that stuff. I’m pretty good with the software end of things, as well. I heard you got top marks in mechanics, and I was so stoked when I found out we would be working together. You know, you can build and I can program.” Bancroft was starting to talk more quickly as he went along.

Khaly was amused by his excitement, but also slightly annoyed at his trailing off topic.

“When I read your proposal about building a robot with wings, I thought it was cool but too close to what everyone else would be doing. So, I made some adjustments to my original drawings and worked out a new part of the proposal. Just the part explaining what we intended to make.”

“That would be seventy percent of my proposal.” Khaly was annoyed and did nothing to hide it.

“You’re right, and I’m sorry, but I think this new plan will blow everyone else out of the water.” He was still waving his paperwork around, so Khaly finally reached up and snatched it. “Sorry about my handwriting—”

She stared at Bancroft, giving a silent command to stop talking. As she made her way through his papers she thought he was right to apologize; his hand writing was atrocious. But then her eyebrows shot up in surprise. She gaped up at him and he smiled widely.

“You want to make a *dragon*?”

“Yeah. I think it would be amazing. We can program it to fly and breathe water!”

“Water? What kind of dragon would breathe water?” Her brow crinkled with confusion.

“None that I know of, but it’s so obvious it would breathe fire. So, if it was water instead, no one would ever expect it.” His grin was wider than before.

“And you made this over the summer?” She was impressed despite still being some-what mad he had changed everything.

“Not exactly, no. I drew a lizard, but when I saw your idea of adding wings I thought a dragon would be perfect. I just added in the water thing a couple days ago. I had a dream you were standing on a hill, with a little creature on your shoulder. It had wings and a long, pointy tail. It was a shade of silver blue, and glistened in the light. When I woke up I had to write it down. I thought then of how perfect it would be to add wings—it would only take a little tweaking—and then make the tail more pointy.” Bancroft shuffled through the thin tissue paper, placing the drawings on top of each other to reveal a hidden image.

Khaly didn’t think his smile could get any wider. She looked down at the drawings, which were remarkable, but she was thinking about something else he said.

“You had a dream about me?” Her eyebrow quirked in mild interest.

“Uh…no…not you, per se. Uh…well, maybe it was you. It was dark, you know, like a silhouette.”

Noting his extreme discomfort she decided to let the topic go. “I thought you were a software guy?” She looked back down at the drawings. “These are unbelievable.”

“Thanks. I love to draw, always have. I’m not great at drawing schematics, though. I mean, I can hold my own, but when it comes to making blueprints for a project I’m not so great.” He shrugged, as if embarrassed.

“That’s okay. I’m pretty good at that. I’ll take these,” she said, shuffling together the thin sheets of paper and reaching for the remainder of his proposal. “Then I’ll rewrite the proposal.”

“You don’t like how I wrote it?” The look on his face and tone of voice showed his annoyance.

Khaly looked up at him, taken aback. “No, it’s not that. Your handwriting makes it really hard to read. So I’ll rewrite it before handing it in. And I thought I would take the drawings to start working out the inner mechanics of the device.”

“Right, sorry. Of course.” He waved his hand dismissively.

“I mean, it is twenty percent of our grade.”

“No, you’re right.”

She slowly ran her eyes over the drawings once again, eyebrows coming together as she drifted deep into thought.

“What is it? Do you want me to change the design?”

“Hmm?”

“Your face is saying you’re not too happy with the drawing.”

“Well, I’m just not sure how to get it to breathe water.” She looked up at him, completely confused.

“From the air.” He shrugged, as if it were obvious.

“The air? How would that work?”

“Make it pull moisture from the air.”

“Seriously?” Khaly was still perplexed. “I have no idea how to do that.”

“We have a year. Plus, if we can’t figure it out, we can change the plans two months before it’s due. That should give us enough time to work things out. Besides, I think the water breathing will fall mostly to the programming end of things.”

“Hmm.” Once again she turned back to the drawings.

“So…”

“Okay, I’ll try to figure something out. I need to design the mechanics first. There’s no guarantee our proposal will be accepted, anyway. We may not even get to do this dragon.”

“True, but that’s not what I was going to say.”

Khaly looked up at him. “What were you going to say?”

“Why did you tell your dad you have a bunch of friends?”

“Why do you care?”

“It’s not that I care, I’m just curious is all.”

Khaly clenched her teeth.

Bancroft shifted, uncomfortable. “Look, I’m sorry if I touched a nerve. I was just curious.”

She looked down at her pants and picked at a loose thread. Letting out a sigh she said, “My dad doesn’t need to know the kids at school all hate me. He has enough to worry about.”

“I’m sure they don’t *all* hate you.”

Khaly’s nose crinkled, as if she smelled something sour.

“What? There are a lot of kids at that school.”

“There are exactly two hundred and seventy-eight students, and two hundred and seventy-seven hate me. Thanks to Jahallah Allmond.”

“Two hundred and seventy-six.” He smiled at her. “Who has two thumbs and doesn’t hate you?” he said, grinning wider and pointing his thumbs toward himself. “This guy.”

Khaly gave him a blank stare. Bancroft wiggled his thumbs and eyebrows, still wearing a goofy grin.

“You’re so weird,” she said, shaking her head and stifling a laugh.

CHAPTER FOUR

On Khaly's eighteenth birthday, her father pulled her out of school early so they could share some father-daughter time. They spent the day together every year, regardless of what was happening in their lives, but this year was different.

"Why do we have to go into the lab today, Father?" she whined. Arledge was making her father's life miserable and she no longer found pleasure in going to the lab.

"I need to check on just one project then we can go. I promise it won't be more than a few minutes."

Dragging her feet, Khaly glanced through the laboratory windows as they passed by. Not everyone in the building worked on robots; some worked on new medicines and trying to find cures for whatever ailed the common man.

When they finally reached to the Robotics Department he turned to her. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Khaly nodded, her attention transfixed by some plans laid out on one of the tables. She looked around to see if anyone was nearby and, seeing the coast was clear, she slipped into the empty lab.

Blueprints of one of the lab's new projects. Her father mentioned they were moving away from mechanical men now they had worked out the sensory issues. The issues *she* had fixed, unbeknownst to them, two months prior. Her fingers traced over the outlines of the design.

She squinted. "It's a bird," she whispered to herself. "No…" She studied it harder, tracing her fingers along the outer lines. The sketch was rough, but her eyes widened with the realization of what it was. "It's a dragon." Khaly clenched her jaw and gritted her teeth. "I can't believe this."

Looking closer, she took in the calculations for the dimensions. Although the design appeared to be the same as Bancroft's, it was missing important aspects. The motherboard and sensors were placed incorrectly, the wrong gears were

being used, and the tail didn't have proper balance. This design would never work, would never fly. There wasn't even an exoskeleton. The question was, who had really come up with this design? She continued to trace the design on the blueprint, looking for the name of the draftsmen, when her father stormed in.

"Khaly!" His voice echoed through the room.

"I-I'm sorry. I just wanted—"

He stomped toward her. "You know better. I've told you time and time again to keep your hands off everything in the lab." Keeping his voice low he dragged her out by her elbow.

"But, that design—it's the same as my school project," she said, trying to explain.

"Nonsense! Arledge brought in that design several months ago. Long before you were given your assignment," he said, still keeping his voice low so as to not attract unwanted attention.

"I'm telling you, it's Bancroft's design!"

When they were finally clear of the building he turned to her. "Khaly, I love you with every ounce of my being, but I'm already under review for the last stunt you pulled."

"I was only trying to help. Besides, what did I do that was so bad?"

"Khaly, you broke into the lab, changed the design schematics, and replaced the old CPU with a completely new one."

"Nobody saw me. You only found out because you caught me coming home and I confessed." She shrugged, with a playful smile.

"You're not as smart as you sometimes think, daughter." Khaly furrowed her brow, confused, so he continued. "You left several of your tools behind, and Arledge found them the next day."

Surprised, Khaly made no sound and only mouthed an, *oh*.

"He filed a formal complaint, stating you were trying to sabotage his work, which is why you are no longer allowed in the laboratory."

She opened and closed her mouth in shock. Why had he not told her?

"But, Father, I'm telling you, that's not Arledge's design."

"You two are not the first people to have considered building a dragon. This idea is not a new one, and that kind of design is certainly not new either. Do you

think I wouldn’t have checked on such a thing? I’ve seen your design plans, Khaly, and fire-breathing isn’t the only difference between the two.”

Khaly didn’t know what to say. Her face was flush with heat, and she was certain it was as red as a beacon. “I’m sorry. I guess I never thought of that.”

“Come on, Khaly. Let’s go. I’ll take you back to school.” Her father started down the street.

Khaly jogged to catch up. “But it’s my birthday. We always spend my birthday together.”

“I, unfortunately, have work to do. I was speaking to my boss. It seems they have a few things for me to take care of before the end of the week.” He paused, his features softening as he looked at her. “I’ll make it up to you.”

There was something in his voice that concerned Khaly, and felt it reverberate from him. He was afraid. Whatever was happening at work, it had him stressed. She didn’t want to add to his anxiety.

“I understand, Father.” She took his hand. “We’ll do something this weekend.”

He smiled down at her and, cupping her face, kissed her on the forehead before again starting down the road.

As soon as her father dropped her off Khaly found Bancroft in the cafeteria, talking with a few other students.

“Hey, Khaly. I thought you were going—”

“We need to talk.” She glared down at him. “Now.”

“Uh, okay.” He stood up, throwing his bag over his shoulder and grabbing his tray. “See ya later,” he said, addressing the table.

Khaly was already halfway out of the room when he put his tray back. He jogged to catch up, and when he rounded the corner she turned on him.

“You told me the dragon was your design!”

“What?” His brow furrowed in confusion.

“The dragon. You said you designed it over the summer.”

“I did.”

“Then how come I just found the exact *same* design on blueprints in my father’s lab?” She was jabbing him repeatedly in the chest with a finger.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Khaly was jabbing so fast he had no time to respond to her accusations or to try and knock her finger away. “Who. Did. You. Get. Those. Drawings. From?” With each word she poked harder.

“Ouch!” Bancroft finally grabbed her wrist, only to catch a slap from her other hand. “Dang, girl! Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Like I said, I created a lizard over the summer then, when I saw your winged man, the idea of the dragon came to me. Now, if I let you go, will you stop poking and slapping me and talk about this rationally?”

“Fine,” she said, yanking her hands away.

“All right, let’s go out to the yard and sit. You tell me what the heck is going on,” he said, rubbing the spot she had been trying to bore through. “I think that’s going to leave a bruise,” he said, following her outside.

“You’ll live,” she said over her shoulder.

They both took a seat on a bench. Bancroft dropped his bag on the ground.

“Okay, talk me through whatever you were being hysterical about.”

“I was not being hysterical.”

“You were, trust me,” he said, rubbing his chest to emphasize the point.

“My father took me to his lab today, and on one of the tables there was a sketch of our dragon. A rough sketch, but what it was couldn’t be mistaken.”

“Well, I’m telling you, *our* dragon is *my* design.”

“Then how did it get into my father’s lab?”

“I only showed my drawings to one other person. My dad’s friend, Arly.”

“Arly?” Khaly narrowed her eyes.

“Yeah, Arly Askey. He and my dad have been friends for years.”

“Arledge?”

Bancroft shrugged. “Yeah, I guess, but I’ve only ever known him as Arly.” His brow furrowed. “Are you saying he stole my designs? Why would he do that?”

“Because he is *beyond* inept.”

“Maybe we should talk to Mr. Metayer and let him know. See what he says. He might have some suggestions.”

“No, we can’t do that,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because, if you haven’t noticed, when it comes to Robotics, Vlarlee is a

small town. If we tell Mr. Metayer about the dragon, it might get my father into trouble."

"Well, don't you think they're going to notice anyway?"

"Like my father said, we aren't the first people to come up with the idea. But if we bring it to their attention it could get my father in trouble and, well, there are a few differences between the dragons."

"What kind of differences?"

"I only got a quick look, and it was in rough shape for a final approved draft, but from what I could see their dragon has a larger, sturdier housing cage, which will make it heavier. The shape and size of the wings are larger, the head is wider, and the tail is a different length with no inner gears to make it move. Also, theirs is a fire-breather."

"That was a quick glance?"

She shrugged.

"Okay, then, business as usual?" Bancroft asked.

"I guess so, yeah." She watched as he sat back on the bench, rubbing his chest. "Sorry about the poking." She gave a weak smile.

"And slap. You slapped me, too."

"Yes, I'm sorry I slapped you." Khaly nudged him. They'd now been working together for three months and had become virtually inseparable. He was like a brother to her, and she his sister; she finally felt like she was home. Khaly didn't realize how much she had truly missed having friends.

She turned sideways on the bench to face him when she caught movement from the corner of her eye. Khaly turned her head and sighed. "Man."

"What?" Bancroft sat up, following her gaze. "Great."

"Hi, losers." Jahallah and her friends strolled into the clearing. "Get kicked out of the building? Your stench finally get you banished?" Her friends giggled.

"Clever," Khaly said. "Come up with that all on your own or did you use your collective brain among the four of you?"

"Did she just call us stupid?" one of the girls asked.

"Well, if you have to ask." Khaly shrugged.

"Whatever, loser." Jahallah shoved her way past her three friends, but they

stood glaring at Khaly and Bancroft. “Come on!” Jahallah yelled. The three girls scrambled to catch up.

“How did they get into this school?” Bancroft asked. “I mean, they barely keep up with any of the assignments.”

“One, or both, of their parents are alumni. Sad, really, but what can you do?” Khaly stood, holding out a hand to Bancroft. “Let’s go. I’m starving. I never actually got to have my birthday lunch with my father.”

“I was eating lunch and you made me throw it out,” he said, taking her hand as she heaved him off of the bench.

“I’ll buy you a cookie, then.”

He smiled. “Raisin nut?”

“Yes, raisin nut.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Khaly stared at the inner workings of the dragon. The gears spun, quietly ticking. She was trying to work out the issues she was having with the most important component of the project. Bancroft was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling as if deep in thought or sleeping with his eyes open. Something he did with increasing frequency over the last three months, ever since Khaly told him about the dragon at her father's lab.

"What if we just made it respond to voice commands?" she offered, not pulling her eyes away. "I'm really close to getting the wings to work, and the exoskeleton nanites are about done. I'm sure that alone would get us a high grade." She spun on her chair to face Bancroft, who still lay on the bed as if unable to hear. "Hello? Usmiri to Bancroft?" She waved her hands over his face.

As if a bucket of cold water had been thrown on him, Bancroft sat straight up, eyes wide. "What!" Frantic, he looked around. "What? What happened?"

"Are you okay?" Khaly slowly moved toward him, her hand outstretched.

Recognition crossed his face, and he relaxed as he figured out where he was. "Yeah, I'm sorry. I guess I just kinda drifted off. What were you saying?" He rubbed his eyes, which were now bloodshot.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine."

"Well," she paused, watching him closely as she again started to explain. "The water-breathing thing is just too hard to work out. I can't seem to convert the humidity from the air into water. It's just not possible. But it wouldn't take much tweaking on your part to get the software to work with voice commands. If—"

"No. It has to breathe water." Bancroft stood, walked toward her workbench. "You *have* to make it work."

"Look, I'm tellin' ya, it can't be done."

"You *have* to make it work!" He urged her.

Khaly stood in front of Bancroft, feeling his response was odd and out of place. They were only a foot apart. She looked into his eyes; he was tired and stressed, but there was something he wasn't telling her.

"Man," she half whispered to herself before speaking softly to Bancroft, "I'm almost done with the exoskeleton. I'll spend my time working on that. Why don't you look at tweaking the software for voice commands, so we don't have to use a remote? Maybe by the time you sort that out I can figure something out for the water thing. Okay?"

He stared at her, and she couldn't ignore it any longer.

"What is going on?"

Bancroft sighed deeply, dropping down into the chair Khaly once occupied. "I'm just so tired," he whispered.

"I know. I see it every day. Something is going on. What is it?"

He drew his eyes up to meet hers. "Have you ever heard of the Elemental Gifts?"

"Yeah, of course. What kid didn't have those story books read to them at night?" She dropped onto the bed, leaning back on her hands.

"No, Khaly."

"No, what?"

"No, they're not stories. The Elementals are real."

"Oh for crying out loud, Bancroft." She leaned toward him. "You're obviously overly stressed about this whole project, but it'll be fine. We still have a little over two months before we absolutely have to change anything."

"I've seen it, Khaly. I've seen the battlefield." He jabbed at a temple with his forefinger. "I've seen the destruction."

"Battlefield? Destruc— What are you talking about?"

"A war is coming, Khaly. The Guild is mounting an army. There are spies everywhere." His eyes were glazed and frantic.

"Uh-huh. Okay. Bancroft, I think you should go home now. Maybe take a *really* long nap."

"No! Khaly, you have to listen to me!" He shot out of his chair, forcing Khaly to her feet. "My family has the Air Elemental; we can see future events."

"Your whole family can tell the future?" Her eyebrows lifted in disbelief.

“Well, no, not my whole family.” Bancroft paused for a moment, shifting from one foot to the other and nibbling on the nail of his middle finger. “Just my brother and I. My parents can’t. It seems to have skipped a generation, or four…” He trailed off, never releasing her eyes from his gaze.

“Right…okay, sure. Fortune-telling that skips generations.” Khaly took a step back. “You really need to get some sleep.”

“I’m not joking around,” he said, grabbing her arms.

“You need to go now.” She tried to remain calm. The last thing she wanted was her parents to come in and start asking questions. “Now, Bancroft.”

“You have to listen to me, Khaly,” he said, tightening his grip. “Something big is coming and we have to stop it. My brother—”

“Right, okay.” She put her hands up to stop him from saying anything further. “Please go.” She slowly removed his hands from her arms.

Bancroft began to open his mouth, but clamped it shut. He then snatched his jacket off the chair and his bag from the floor. With his hand on the doorknob he looked back, but didn’t say anything. He looked at the dragon on the table.

“I’ll finish the project. I don’t think you and I should work together anymore. I’ll finish everything that needs to be done. You’ll get your credits for it.” She watched as emotion crossed his face, but couldn’t tell if it was fear or concern. He had scared her so she didn’t care. “Please go.”

Bancroft nodded, pulling open the door and slipping through with no other sound.

Tears welled in Khaly’s eyes. She had thought he was a friend, but the moment he grabbed her she had feared for her life. He was desperate, crazed.

She slumped in the chair, spinning it back to face the dragon. A whirring, then clicking, came from the case next to her, bringing her out of her musings. *The nanites prototype must have finished its pre-programming process.* She stared at the cabinet blankly as her mind ran over her and Bancroft’s conversation.

“Gift of premonition,” she mumbled to herself, drawing her attention back to the dragon. “Maybe I should ask him what grade we get on this project; take the pressure off.” She leaned forward on her desk, putting her chin on the top of her hands. “What do you think?” She reached up and cupped the dragon’s chin.

“Sumora?” She smiled despite herself. “Not only am I talking to a fake dragon, but I just gave it a name.”

“Khaly.” Her mother’s muffled voice drifted into her room. “Come down, please.”

She reached up, turning off the dragon and watching as the gears slowly wound down before turning off her lamp and going downstairs.

The latch of the door clicked, and the dragon shook its head then steadied itself as it stumbled to one side. The gears inside its exposed body clicked, whirring with its movement.

Shaking its head again, the dragon slowly made its way to the edge of the table. Looking down to the floor it hesitated, as if unsure of the distance. It then lay flat, dangling its head over the ledge for a moment before stepping back. As if deciding the risk wasn’t worth it, it backed up and laid down, curling into a ball and closing its eyes.

Khaly came into the kitchen and saw her mother sitting alone with a mug in front of her. She glanced up as Khaly stepped in further.

“Come join me, dear.” Her voice was soft.

“What is it? What’s happened?” Alarm began to rise in her chest.

“Please sit, dear.” Her mother gestured to the empty chair in front of her. “I made you some cocoa.” She smiled warmly, but Khaly could see right through it. Something was wrong.

“Where’s Father?” she asked, cautiously taking the empty chair.

“He had to return to the office.”

“Why?” He never went into work on weekends, and never stayed late. The company didn’t agree with overtime, and labor laws didn’t allow a company to keep an employee longer than eight hours.

“I shouldn’t be telling you this, but your father’s job is in jeopardy. His current project has fallen behind schedule by seven months, and he has only until the end of the week to get it to start working.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Khaly’s brows came together.

“You know why, dear.”

“Are you saying you want me to break into father’s lab and fix his dragon?”

“Of course not.” Her eyes widened in mock surprise, but it didn’t fool Khaly.

“No, of course not. What was I thinking?” She shook her head, taking a sip of the warm cocoa. It was creamy and rich, just as she liked it. She lost herself in thought, again thinking about the conversation she and Bancroft had. “Mother?”

“Hmm?” Hettie also seemed lost in thought.

“Remember those stories you used to read to me?”

“Which ones, dear? You loved so many stories I couldn’t keep track.” This time her smile was genuine, with nothing hiding behind it.

“The ones about the Elemental Gifts.”

There was a subtle twitch in the corner of her mother’s eye. “Oh, yes, those ones were your favorites.”

“Do you still have them?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Why do you ask?” She took a sip from her mug, all the while not taking her eyes off Khaly.

“Well, Bancroft was just talking— You know what, never mind. It’s not important.”

“I heard the two of you arguing up there. Is everything all right?” She carefully placed her mug down, watching Khaly intently. “He’s such a nice boy. I should hate to think the two of you are no longer friends.”

“I’m not sure we’re friends anymore.”

“Oh, Khaly. Don’t let one disagreement come between you. You’ve been so happy these past few months. I’d hate for you to lose such an important relationship.”

“I think Bancroft and I are just too different.” She shrugged.

“It’s those little differences that will keep you strong.” Her mother smiled.

“Strong for what? It doesn’t matter anyways. We graduate in three months, and I’m certain he’s returning to Morunfell to be with his girlfriend. So there isn’t anything to try to fight for.” Khaly took another sip from her mug. As she sat it down, she noticed the sadness -or was it worry- on her mother’s face. “It’s okay, Mother. I knew those were his plans from the beginning.”

Hettie sat and watched her daughter for a long moment, rolling the mug between her hands. “Those Elemental stories…” she started.

“What about them?”

“All stories are, in some way, based on fact.” She was chewing her bottom lip. “You need to keep an open mind when it comes to things you don’t fully understand.”

“Right, okay.” Khaly stood up. “I’m going to take this to my room. I have some work to do before I go for a walk later.”

“Yes, of course, dear. But you be careful on that walk. I’m certain your father would not approve.”

Khaly gave a smile, kissed her mother on the cheek, and made her way out of the kitchen.

The words *all stories are based on fact* ran through her head. She mumbled the words to herself, then shook them off and went to her room. It was darker now and the room almost pitch black, but she knew it well and didn’t turn a light on until she reached her desk. Flipping on the desk lamp, she placed her mug down and froze. Confusion gripped her. The dragon had moved from the spot where she left it. It was curled in a partial ball, its tail shooting straight out and its head curled under its front leg. The top wing lay across it, like a blanket.

“What the—” She stood with her hands on her hips, studying the robot’s position. It was cat-like in nature, but not something that was programed into it. “Must have been a malfunction, maybe the gears weren’t completely turned off or there is a small glitch in the software.” She spoke softly to herself, trying to work out the possible source of the problem. “Now, let’s just get you back into a proper position so I can take a better look at you, Sumora.” She gently pulled the dragon out of its curled position, noticing the gears rotated easily enough. She spread the wings out, placing the dragon in a seated position.

Khaly reconnected the dragon to her control board and began to run software diagnostics. While she waited, she pulled a nanite out of the programmer and placed it under her magnifier so she could get a look at the tiny circuits.

“All right now, let’s see if you can replicate yourself.” A small spark shot out from the tiny robot. “Man.” She leaned back in the chair. The nanites were needed to create the exoskeleton for the dragon. They would help to keep the gears and circuit boards from overheating when it was in flight. Otherwise, the constant flapping of the wings would cause it to begin to overheat, fusing

together the gears. In every test they ran, no matter what material was used, they had hit the same issue. Until Khaly had come up with the idea of a self-cooling system. The nanites would replicate using a malleable metal, golinum, and create individual scales that would fuse to the metal framing.

They took her several weeks to design and build. Bancroft had needed to create the program to make the circuits work in the intended fashion.

Khaly rubbed her temples; it had already been a long day. In an hour her father would be home, and she would need to go for that walk. As she was about ready to get up she caught a small movement from the tiny robot. Khaly leaned back in to look through the magnifier, a smile crossing her face as the nanites started to move about. Khaly picked one up with the tweezers, rotating it. The tiny legs were moving.

“All right, now we’re getting somewhere. Just rebooting yourself, were you?” She placed a piece of golinum into an insulated case, adding the nanites. Carefully, she placed the entire container back into the programmer. She connected the nanites, thinking to turn on the replication circuit. She input the commands for them to reproduce using the metal provided, then to fuse together in the shape of a scale.

“There, that should keep you busy tonight.” Bringing her attention back to the dragon, Khaly looked at the status of the analysis. “And you, Sumora, should have your first scale by morning. Then I should know what went wrong with you today.” As she was about to stand, she heard the company car that drove her father to and from work. They lived on a street with the proper circuits for the electronic vehicles, but no one in their area could afford to actually own one. The Robotics Department was nice enough to take her father and a couple of other managers in a carpool.

Khaly quickly grabbed her coat and shoes, then bolted down the stairs. She passed her mother in the hall on her way to the back door.

“Going for a walk, be back later,” she shouted as her father opened the front door.

CHAPTER SIX

Khaly crept up to the building, careful to remain in the shadows. She knew the guards' schedule. They hadn't changed it, even after her last break-in. She scurried over to the back door, pulling tools from her back pocket. She paused, pursing her lips as she realized that they may not have changed the schedule but they had changed the security keypad.

"Man."

Khaly looked around for another possible point of entry, and noticed an open window on the second floor. She jogged up, eyeing the height. Although she had her rare moments, she wasn't agile. She spotted a table for the employees to sit outside during lunch. If she stood on top of it she could get a bit closer.

Hastily, she pulled the table under the window and jumped on top of it.

"I can do this," she said to herself. "Sure, I can."

Gauging the distance, Khaly crouched like a cat before springing up to grab the window ledge.

"Ha!" She was surprised she had actually reached it. Khaly hung by her fingertips, feet dangling. "Now what?" It hadn't occurred to her the ledge may be too small for her to climb onto. She attempted to hoist herself up enough to rest her forearm on the ledge, but only smooshed her face against the window. Unable to maintain the position she fell, hitting the edge of the table before landing on her back.

Winded by the impact she started to cough, her body trying to get the air back in her lungs. As she began to roll over, she heard voices coming from the corner of the building.

"Security," she hissed, running for the shadows across the way. Ducking low, she watched as the guards made their way to the table.

They both glanced at it, then around the surrounding area. One looked up at the window and pointed. She couldn't hear their conversation, but she got the

gist. She needed to get through the window before they closed it, or figure out how to pick the lock. The two guards moved the table back to its rightful spot, then one returned to stand under the window while the other apparently went inside to close it.

Khaly cursed under her breath. “Lock-picking it is then.”

She waited impatiently while the two guards finished their sweep and went back to their desks. She ran to the back door and stared at the keypad. It was a better technology than they used in the past. Before, she only needed to input five numbers, but this new keypad required a series of numbers and symbols. Khaly knew it would be impossible to guess the code. She would need to make the keypad believe she input the proper code instead. Pulling her little tool kit out of her pocket, she quickly glanced around then knelt down on one knee.

Removing the outer casing of the keypad, she studied the small circuit board and began to cross the circuits and pathways as if she had designed the program herself. It was only a few minutes before she gained access.

“Hmm, maybe not as hard as I thought.” Holding the door open with one foot, she shoved her tools back in her pocket and steadily put the casing back in place.

“Good as new.” She smiled, smug. Khaly quickly jogged through the hallway; her father’s lab was two floors up and on the opposite side of the building. As she approached the large windows overlooking the different labs she stopped and flattened herself against the wall. Khaly assumed there would be roving guards within the building. She peeked around the corner, verifying the coast was clear. Running to the next window she repeated the process.

Her goal was to get to the emergency staircase. She had to avoid the main stairwell and the elevators, which were located next to each other.

She had checked the last corner and was bolting for the emergency staircase when she heard a ding from the elevator. She briefly paused, trying to determine which direction to go. She was halfway between the last corner and the stairs. The corner was exposed so, in the split second before the elevator doors began to open, she bolted for the staircase.

Charging through the door Khaly quickly spun, catching the handle before it slammed shut behind her. There was a small metallic click as the latch caught. She put her ear to the door. Hearing muffled footsteps she bolted up the stairs,

two at a time and trying to make as little noise as possible. She rounded the landing when she heard the door open. She immediately suctioned herself to the wall, trying to steady her breath. She was only two steps away from the door to the second story.

Squeezing shut her eyes she murmured to herself, “go away, go away, go away.” She opened her eyes to the sound of a door closing on the floor below. Holding her breath she crept up to the railing, carefully looking over and listening intently. There was no sound, not even her own breathing. Khaly stepped away from the railing, letting out the air in her lungs and climbing the final two stairs.

She cracked open the door and peered through, ensuring the floor was empty. The lab was at the end of the hall; she only had to pass three others to get there. Slipping through the crack, Khaly gently closed the door behind her. Skillfully, she made her way to the end of the hall, breathing a sigh of relief to find the keypad here had not been replaced. Kneeling, she removed the top plate, and it took her mere seconds to circumvent the security measure. She was walking into the lab moments later.

Not wanting to alert any of the roving guards outside by turning on a light, she took out a small flashlight she had created. It was as bright as one five times its size. Careful to keep the beam of light concentrated below window level, she searched the lab for the dragon. She found the blueprints rolled up in a corner, by a locked cabinet. A corner of her mouth twitched into a smirk; she could open the simple lock with her eyes closed.

Khaly reached for the blueprint first, needing to see if any changes had been made since her first glimpse. Rolling it out on a nearby table, she put the flashlight in her mouth and shone the light down on the design. It was still crude; no exoskeleton, and some gears appeared missing while others had been placed in odd areas. Khaly shook her head. It was obvious this was all Arledge; no wonder they weren’t getting anywhere.

“I hope these are out of date,” she whispered to herself, rolling the paper back up and replacing it where she found it.

Certain the dragon was in the cabinet, she made fast work of getting it open. The dragon sat in several pieces. The head was separate from the body, the tail

lay to one side, and one of the legs was detached. She also took notice the circuit boards weren't connected, and looked to be incomplete.

She pursed her lips as she reached in, taking out the main pieces of the mechanical creature. Khaly moved to the back corner of the room, where she wasn't as visible through the large observation window. If a guard came, hiding wouldn't be too difficult. Moving quickly, she returned to the cabinet to close the doors and loosely replace the lock. The cabinet was in full view of the window.

Khaly stood on one side of the table, facing outward, her back to the wall. With her flashlight she looked over the gears, and it did appear at least some of the design had been changed. She recognized Chahara's handiwork.

"At least she knows what she's doing. Sorta."

Khaly bent in close, again pulling her tool kit from her back pocket. She removed several gears that were too small for the area they were being implemented for. Looking about the room for supplies, her eyes caught what she needed. Swiftly and purposefully, she moved across the room and pulled down a box with extra gears. They were older, but this was only a prototype. When they build the real one they would make new gears. She grabbed five that looked like they were in better condition, then replaced the box and went back to the table.

Khaly worked as quickly as she could to get the gears in place. Using the key in her tool kit she spun the gears before adding any circuits. She needed to tighten some screws on both her new components and some of the existing ones that were in odd places. Flipping the body to the other side, she found one of the main gears was jammed. Realizing this side had been put together completely wrong, she hung her head in defeat. This dragon needed to be taken apart and rebuilt. She looked at the clock on the wall. It was already quarter to two. It had taken her an hour longer to get into the building than expected.

"I have no choice. There's no point in changing the other parts if this side is just going to jam everything up." Khaly heard a noise from the hall; the elevator had dinged, indicating she was about to have a visitor.

Hastily, she grabbed the body and the head of the dragon, dropping to the floor behind the table. She heard the click-clack of someone's shoes as they walked down the hall, suddenly realizing her flashlight was still on the table. Reaching

above her head she felt around for it, but her fingers grazed it and caused it to roll out of reach.

“Man.”

Getting on her knees she popped her head up and snatched the flashlight, shutting it off and diving back out of sight. The footsteps stopped. She knew there was no way the guard had finished his round of the floor. The door to the lab opened. Khaly sucked in a breath, as if holding it made her invisible. She prayed to all the gods they didn’t come to this end of the lab. All her tools and extra pieces were still on the table. From a distance they were small enough to go unnoticed, but if anyone came too close they’d be seen.

The lights to the lab flicked on, illuminating everything. She blinked at the bright light, listening as the click-clack of shoes walked across the room. They stopped once again and Khaly heard the rattle of the cabinet doors.

“Khaly, are you in here?” A familiar voice called out.

“Yes,” she said meekly, slowly rising from the floor. “Don’t be mad, Chahara. I heard you were having problems and I thought you could use a fresh set of eyes. Please don’t call my father.” She put the dragon parts back on the table, lowering her chin.

“I won’t. I could use your help.” Chahara said with a warm smile. “Now, duck.”

“What?”

“Duck,” she repeated through clenched teeth.

Khaly caught a quick glimpse of the guard coming down the hall and dropped to the floor. A minute later the door opened and she could hear voices.

“Oh, it’s you, Ms. Deuvou. I didn’t realize that someone was working up here tonight.”

“Yes, I thought I would smooth out some of the kinks in our project. You know how it is. Deadlines. Bah.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll let the perimeter guards know you’re in here.”

“Thank you so much, Wolfia.”

“It’s Thardar, ma’am.”

“Yes, of course it is.”

Khaly rolled her eyes, trying to contain a giggle. A few minutes later, Chahara

was standing above her.

"You can get up now."

"Thanks."

"Now, tell me what you've done."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Khaly stood fidgeting in front of Bancroft's locker, looking from side to side, and hoping no one of significance saw her. She spotted him down the hall as he came around a corner. He was talking with another boy, showing a great deal of animation. When she caught his eye she saw a quick flash of emotion cross his face, but it disappeared just as fast. She hadn't spoken to him in nearly three weeks, so she wasn't surprised at the neutral expression he was now sporting.

"Can I talk to you?" Her voice sounded small, as if she was unsure of herself.

Bancroft watched her briefly before answering. "Yeah, I guess." He turned to his friend and waved. "I'll see you later." Turning back to Khaly, he said, "What do you want?"

She grabbed his arm, dragging him down the hall and into a washroom.

"This is the girls' washroom." His face flushed, as if mortified of anyone seeing him coming in or out.

Khaly quickly pushed on each stall door, making sure they were alone. When she was done, she ran to the main door and locked it.

"Tell me about the Elemental Gifts." She was speaking quickly, franticly.

"What, here?" His voice got lower, as if frightened to speak in the open.

"Yes, tell me about the Gifts."

Bancroft covered Khaly's mouth with his hand, his eyes darting about the room.

She pushed him away from her. "What are you—"

Again, he covered her mouth. "Not here," he mouthed, slowly removing his hand. She was about to protest when he brought his finger up and made a shushing motion.

Confused, she scrunched her face at him, then took notice of the fear and apprehension in his eyes as he looked about the room.

"If you've come to apologize to me for being a jerk, I don't have time for

this," he said, trying to sound natural.

Still unsure of why he was acting like this she decided to play along anyway. "I just wanted to say I was sorry. I was wrong and I need your help with our project." She raised her shoulders and shook her head in confusion.

"Fine, but I have to get to class now." He made a quick note on a piece of paper, handing it to her before promptly leaving.

She looked down at the paper. *Can't talk in the open, too dangerous. I'll meet you at your place later.*

She glanced up, ready to speak, but he was already out the door. Khaly shoved the note into her back pocket and went to her next class as well. She was confused, but also now concerned. *What is he so afraid of?* The Elemental Gift stories were known worldwide.

"He's so weird," she said to herself.

Khaly sat on her bed, staring at her water dragon, Sumora staring back at her.

Sumora tilted her head back and forth, then wiggled her behind like a cat ready to pounce. Something she had grown into the habit of doing as of late.

Sumora's wings were not fully complete as she still needed to add the exoskeleton, but it took days for each scale to be created. Khaly found it a little unnerving that Sumora had seemed alive, since she could still see the inner workings of the dragon.

Khaly looked at her clock. It was eleven p.m. and Bancroft still hadn't shown up. Sumora swished her tail back and forth, teetering on the edge of the desk.

Khaly lifted her finger. "Don't!" she whisper-shouted. Sumora sat back, tilting her head and giving a small, cat-like clicking sound. "No talking back." Khaly pursed her lips.

There was a small *tink!* at her window, startling both of them. Sumora stood on all fours, her tail sticking straight out, making her appear a few centimeters larger.

For a moment, Khaly gaped at her. "That's new."

Another *tink!* at the window. She lifted her finger to the dragon, who settled back down, smacking her lips as if chewing. Khaly moved to the window and looked down at the back lawn. Bancroft was standing below her window, a hand

full of pebbles and ready to throw another. Khaly's brow came together in annoyance.

She opened the window. "What are you doing? It's eleven o'clock. I thought you were coming over after school."

He looked around. "Can I come up?"

"Yeah, I'll be right there."

"No need." He started to scale the side of the house.

She heard rustling behind her and realized she couldn't let him know about the dragon. Not yet. Khaly rushed over, and as Khaly got closer Sumora got up on all fours, swishing her tail and knocking several things over. She picked up the dragon and placed her on the floor of her closet. Sumora looked at Khaly and clicked.

"You behave, don't make a sound. Lay there and be good."

Sumora clicked again.

"No talking back." The corners of Khaly's mouth curved up slightly; she was starting to get attached to this creature.

"Who're you talking to?" Bancroft asked as he landed lightly on the floor. He wasn't breathing heavy, but still leaned back against the windowsill for support.

Khaly slammed the closet door, startled by his sudden appearance. "Nobody. That didn't take you long."

"Yeah, I'm a good climber." He smiled at her, but eyed the closet as she went to sit on the bed. "Sorry I'm so late," he said. Khaly cleared her throat, pulling his attention from the closet.

"Yeah, why *are* you so late? I thought we were going to meet up right after school."

"I had to wait until it was safe." There was a small thump from the closet, drawing him back to it. "Is someone in there?"

"No, of course no—"

"Khaly, it's important we're alone," he whispered, pointing his thumb toward the noise, the fear back in his eyes.

"It's fine, there's no one in there." She tried to make her voice sound confident and sure. They sat in silence for a long moment before Khaly broke it. "Tell me about the Element Gifts stuff."

“The Elemental Gifts,” he said.

“Right, okay. Well, tell me about them.”

He turned, sticking his head outside the window. Khaly could see him glance around before coming back in and closing it, then the curtains. He moved to the door, making sure it was closed all the way.

“What are you doing?”

Abruptly, he turned and lifted a finger to his mouth to shush her. Khaly crossed her arms, her annoyance rising.

“What is going on?” She said, causing him to flinch.

He moved to sit next to her, bringing his voice to a low whisper. “It’s dangerous for us to talk about this. I shouldn’t have brought it up that day and, somehow, someone found out. Now my house is being watched. I’m certain I’m being followed.”

Khaly struggled to keep her face neutral, but her heart pounded in her chest. “I don’t understand.”

“Look, those with gifts are taken away. They disappear, never to be seen again. The Guild has a long arm, and many eyes and ears. You have to be careful who you talk to.”

“The Guild? What’s the Guild?” Khaly wasn’t whispering. She felt no need, and she wasn’t sure if she believed him.

“It’s a faction of the government. Their sole purpose is to find those with gifts and eliminate them.” There was another thump from the closet, and Bancroft’s already unsteady hands began to shake even more. He eyed the closet, then her. “This is a trap,” he said, mostly to himself, and shot up off the bed, rushing for the window.

Before he reached it, Khaly grabbed his wrist, spinning him around to face her. “It’s not a trap, I promise. Just calm down; sit.” She guided him to her desk chair when another thump came. Khaly now turned to the closet, pursing her lips and shaking her head.

“Then who is in there?” Frantic, Bancroft couldn’t keep his voice down. He pointed toward the noise, his face drained of color.

“I…it’s—” There was a knock on her door.

“Khaly? What’s going on in there?” Her mother’s voice came through.

“Nothing, Mother. I’m sorry. I was just doing some work, that’s all,” she said.

“Work? What kind of work?” Her mother started to turn the knob and Khaly panicked. Bancroft looked like he was about to jump out the window head first, his panic more evident than her own.

She wasn’t allowed to have visitors after ten, and certainly not boys. Since Bancroft snuck into the house, her parents didn’t know he was there. Bancroft’s comment of this being a trap, fearful he was being followed, explained his behavior. Khaly grabbed his wrist, yanking him out of the chair. She only had one option, and was forced to shove him into the closet with Sumora.

She opened the door to find the little dragon sitting on the top shelf, looking down and swishing its tail as if happy to see her. Then Sumora eyed Bancroft, promptly increasing in size and hissing.

Bancroft’s eyes bulged and he yelped. “What the hell is that?” He fought against Khaly in his rising panic.

“Be quiet and get in there. And you”—she pointed to the dragon—“Behave!” She tried to keep her voice low.

Sumora smacked her lips, but didn’t return to normal size. Instead, she watched Bancroft suspiciously through narrowed eyes. Khaly slammed the closet door shut as her mother peeked her head around the other door.

“Khaly, do you have someone in here?” she asked, stepping into the room.

“No, of course not. I’m just working on the dragon.” She pointed to the empty desk.

“I don’t see it, honey. Where is it?” Her mother walked toward her.

“Bancroft has it. He’s working out the final touches in the software.” The words tumbled out of her mouth.

Her mother eyed her, pursing her lips. “Uh-huh. So, what are you working on then?”

“Uh…” Her heart was pounding so hard she thought her mother would hear it. She wouldn’t be able to explain either Bancroft or the dragon in her closet. “The exoskeleton!” she said. “I’m working on the exoskeleton.”

A thump, followed by rustling noises, came from her closet. Khaly bit her lip. Her mother eyed the closet, then her.

“I see. Well, don’t stay up too late.” She started to leave the room, then turned

back. “And Khaly, dear…”

“Yes?”

“Keep the noise down, we don’t want to wake the neighbors. They may call the authorities. Lately there have been some complaints about noise and commotion during the day.”

Khaly crinkled her brow. “What kind of noise?”

Her mother gave her a knowing look. “They seem to think we have a cat. Apparently, they hear a great deal of howling while you’re at school.” She had begun to close the door while still speaking. “Say hello to Bancroft for me. Tell him he needs to be more careful, especially if he’s working on that dragon of yours.” She closed the door, leaving Khaly in complete confusion.

There was another thump, a hiss, and a yelp that came from the closet, reminding her Bancroft was trapped with a potentially ticked-off and now aggressive dragon.

She rushed to the door. Bancroft stumbled out, his hair in disarray, shirt torn, and fear in his eyes. Before Khaly could react, Sumora spit a stream of boiling water.

“No!” She threw the closest thing she could grab on top of Bancroft to prevent the stream from hitting him, but her robe only protected him from the last bit of water. The first part hit his leg, soaking his pants.

“Oh gods, that’s hot!” He scrambled out of his pants, leaving him standing in his pink boxer shorts. Sumora made to spit at him again, but Khaly reached down and clamped the dragon’s mouth shut with her hand.

“Bad! Bad Sumora,” she said. “Now, stop it.” Khaly let go and Sumora swallowed back what Khaly assumed was another water attack.

Bancroft gaped at Sumora as she jumped onto the chair, then onto the desk. She turned to face them, sitting and wrapping her tail around herself. Bancroft couldn’t take his eyes off her. For the longest time, he stood without saying a word. Khaly allowed him time to process what had just happened.

“I think I may have an Elemental Gift.” Khaly broke the silence, hoping to shake him from his trance. “You probably shouldn’t stare at Sumora anymore; she doesn’t like that.”

His eyes slowly made their way to Khaly, then Bancroft stepped back, tripping

and falling onto her bed.

“It doesn’t…how…when did this happen?” Khaly could see Bancroft fighting hard to keep his voice low and his panic contained.

Khaly bent down to pick up his pants before joining him on the bed. “I started noticing things about a month ago. But she has become more active in the last couple weeks.”

“She?”

“Yeah, well, she has a lot of cat-like qualities and a lot of people refer to cats as *she*, so…she.” They both were now watching the dragon as she watched them. “But that’s why I wanted to talk to you. I wasn’t going to show you Sumora until I knew more about these gifts.”

“Sumora?”

“It’s an ancient Nylm word for water.”

“Ah.”

“Bancroft? Are you going to say anything at all? Do I have a gift? Or did you do this?”

“Me?” He was finally fully out of his trance. “Why would you think this was me?”

“You said you had a gift, so I just assumed.”

“There’s no way. My Elemental is Air.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have premonitions.” He sat silent for a minute, contemplating, before the realization hit. “You must have the Fire Elemental.”

“Fire? But she breathes water.”

“No, the Elementals don’t work like that. You brought Samara—”

“Sumora.”

“Right, sorry. You brought Sumora to life. Fire is the Elemental of life and death.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“And the Guild, how do they fit into all this? How do they know who has these gifts?”

“Why do you think we take those aptitude tests? They’re not just for placing us in schools based on our skills. It’s to find out if you’re an Elemental.”

“And this is bad?”

A clicking noise came from the desk. Sumora was wiggling her behind, eyeing Khaly.

“Uh, what’s it doing?”

“Preparing to jump.” Khaly pushed herself further back on the bed, patting her lap once.

Sumora tapped her front feet in excitement and leapt off the desk, landing gently in Khaly’s lap. A soft purring came from her, and she circled once before lying down in a ball.

“It really is cat-like, isn’t it?” Bancroft studied the dragon. Most of the body was still exposed, and the gears within spun and ticked. He reached out an unsteady hand, but Sumora raised her head and narrowed her eyes. Bancroft immediately pulled his hand back. “I don’t think it likes me.”

“Well, maybe you should stop referring to her as *it*.” Khaly quirked an eyebrow a him.

“If it—she—is alive, then why can we see gears. Why hasn’t she grown skin?”

“I’m not sure, but the areas that are fully covered feel real. Here.” She took his hand and put it on one of Sumora’s fully covered legs. A small growl escaped from her throat. “Be nice,” Khaly said.

Sumora clicked and settled back down. Khaly pursed her lips, but placed Bancroft’s hand on the leg. It was warm and smooth. The scales were seamless and seemed to shimmer a bluish-gold color. Khaly watched as he ran his hand down to the feet then the claws, stopping at the nails.

“She has nails.”

“Yup. She developed them about a week ago. They just sorta grew.”

He ran his hand over her tail, which was also fully covered. “She’s warm. I don’t understand. I don’t feel any of the gears in her leg or tail. But she clearly has them.”

“I know, a little unnerving isn’t it? Once I placed the scales on her, by the next day they had fully sealed and become part of her.”

“Why isn’t she fully covered?”

“It takes at least two days for one scale to be made. I think that’s what has made her real. I started with her face and head first, then went down her neck, and that’s when she really came to life.”

“Then maybe it’s not the dragon you brought to life, maybe it’s the scales.”

They both sat and stared at Sumora.

“Can I hold her?” he asked.

“Really? You want to risk that?” Khaly raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not really sure, but I would maybe like to give it a shot.”

Khaly looked down at the dragon as she looked up at her. Sumora tilted her head, squinting.

“Be nice now. Please.” Khaly picked her up under her front legs.

Sumora’s body dangled as Khaly handed her over. Bancroft gripped her body gingerly, making sure not to put his fingers through her frame and into the moving parts. He held her at eye level and they looked at each other. Sumora let out a deep sigh, as if resigning to the moment.

“I felt that.” Bancroft’s voice was filled with awe, his fear apparently leaving him.

“What did you feel?”

“When she took in that breath, I felt her chest move in and out. Like lungs. Then when she breathed out, I felt the air on my face.”

“I know. Weird, right?”

Sumora looked at Khaly, clicking and smacking her lips. Her tail started to swish back and forth.

“Uh, you better put her down now. I think she’s done being cooperative.”

“Right. Sorry.” He put her gently down on the bed between them. “Maybe we can speed up the process for the scales. Get her fully covered.”

Khaly pointed to the box on her desk. “That’s where I put the nanites and material for conversion into scales. I’ve tried to speed up the process, but I can’t get it to work.”

“I’ll have a look.” He got up and walked across the room, opening the box and pulling out the tray everything was placed on. The current scale was halfway complete. Bancroft immediately got to work using the magnifying glass and Khaly’s tools.

She sat and watched as he worked quickly. It was almost twenty minutes before she spoke again. “Bancroft?”

“Hmm?” He didn’t take his eyes off of the nanites.

“What happens to those who show their gifts during the aptitude tests?”

His hands froze, and he twisted in the chair. “They disappear.”

“What do you mean, disappear?”

“They’re taken away, disposed of.”

“You can’t be serious. You’re saying the government kills people for having these gifts? But what about us? They didn’t take us.”

“I knew about the tests, so I was able to fake my way through.”

“What about me? Obviously, I knew nothing about any of this.”

“I don’t know, but now their watching, waiting.” He turned back to the nanites then suddenly asked, “How do you know nothing? Your mom or dad never said anything, taught you anything?”

“No. She read the stories to me, but that’s it. Well, except lately…” She trailed off, thinking of the odd conversations she had with her mother about how stories are based on fact. Did her mother know about this world? Did she have an Elemental Gift?

“Lately, what?” he asked, watching her, but she didn’t respond. He asked again. “Khaly. Lately what?”

“Oh, uh…nothing. Well, just before I let you out of the closet, she told me to warn you to be careful.”

“To be careful? Did she say anything else?” His words were eager.

“No, except I needed to keep the noise down so the neighbors don’t call the authorities.”

“Oh.” He returned to his task.

“That’s all you’re going to say? ‘Oh.’”

“It probably means some of your neighbors are spies for the Guild.” His tone was causal, but Khaly attributed it to his concentrating on the nanites. “Okay, I’m done here. Do you have extra material for the scales?”

“You fixed it?” she said brightly, pointing. “Top desk drawer. There should be enough to finish Sumora’s exoskeleton.”

He put the partially finished scale and remaining materials in the desk drawer back in the box, along with the nanites.

“I should go. It’s getting late.” He stood up, making his way to the window.

Khaly got off the bed.

Bancroft turned abruptly, catching her off guard. “Remember, Khaly, don’t talk to anyone about this. Not a soul. It’s life and death, for both us and our families.”

She nodded, and he climbed out the window and disappeared. Yet she was still confused about the whole thing. Elemental Gifts, the Guild, spies—it made her head hurt. Khaly turned to Sumora, who was spread out on the bed. She crossed her arms. Somehow, she needed to figure out how to get Sumora to keep things down while she was at school.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Several days after her midnight meeting with Bancroft, Khaly returned to her father's lab. She promised Chahara she would help with the final software changes that would allow the robot to work with the remote control. She liked Chahara, trusted her. Khaly considered asking if she had heard of the Elemental Gifts, but wasn't sure if she should risk everyone's life with the topic. She hadn't spoken with her own parents; she was too scared to find out they were spies. Would her parents turn in their own daughter? Was her mother merely baiting her with the comments about the Elemental Gifts and being careful?

She found herself staring at nothing, and was startled out of her thoughts with Chahara's words.

"I think we finally have it." Chahara's voice was cheerful.

"Hmm?" Khaly looked at her.

"The software update seems to be working. Watch." She moved the head using the remote in her hand, and it responded seconds later.

"Its response time is a little slow." Khaly scrunched her face. "That will likely cause it to crash while in flight, either when it's in the air or when it's landing. There's too much of a lag. Maybe there's something wrong with the amount of power the sensors are getting from the core."

Chahara moved over to their software tester and looked over the code, while Khaly used her tools to check the chips in the dragon. Her first thought was that her nanites might help with the problem. They could be programmed and placed onto the tiny robot's sensors, causing them to transmit faster and resolving the lagging issues. It occurred to her it may bring this dragon to life, like it did with Sumora. She couldn't risk that kind of exposure.

"I think I fixed it," Chahara said, startling Khaly out of her trance and causing her to jump. "Are you all right? You haven't been yourself tonight."

"Yeah, just stress at school. Our final project is due in a little over a month."

“Ah, yes. I remember that feeling all too well. I’m sorry to say that kind of pressure doesn’t go away. If anything, it gets worse.”

“Fantastic.”

Chahara grabbed the tools from Khaly and made some adjustments to the software. There was a small spark, causing them both to jerk their hands away.

“Oh no,” Chahara moaned. She picked up the remote and attempted to get the dragon to respond to the commands, but it just sat and stared blankly ahead.

“I think you shorted it out.” Khaly sighed deeply.

“Great. Just great.” Chahara tossed the remote onto the table.

“Maybe we should name it.” Khaly shrugged.

“What? Why would we name it?” She crinkled her brow and nose at Khaly.

“Well, they name boats for good luck. Maybe if we name the dragon we’ll have good luck.” She shrugged. “Couldn’t hurt.”

“We don’t need luck, Khaly. We need skill and now a new chip. Arledge is going to come in tomorrow and see the dragon in worse condition than it was today. He’s going to figure out we’ve been working on this at night and think I’ve sabotaged him. It will cost me my job. So no, Khaly, I don’t think naming the stupid thing is going to do anything.” Chahara pushed off the table, crossing her arms and leaning against a stool.

Khaly shrugged. “Well, first off, I don’t think Arledge is smart enough to figure anything out. I’m convinced he has someone tie his shoes for him in the morning. And, second, I think it’s a perfect time to name it because it will bring the luck you need to sort it out before Arledge is able to figure out the coffee machine.”

Chahara waved her hand. “Fine, name it.” She stood and started packing up their tools. “Then let’s get out of here; it’s already three am. You have school in the morning, and I have to come in to get this working.”

Khaly grabbed the dragon’s chin, the inner workings visible. The unblinking eyes stared at her blankly. She smiled. “Orantheio.”

“What?” Chahara turned to face her.

“Orantheio. It’s an ancient Nylm word for—”

“Fire, yes, I know. How do you know that?”

Khaly stood up straight, releasing the dragon. “I’m from Nylm Hills. They

teach the language in the schools there."

"I didn't realize your family was from Nylm Hills." Chahara studied her for a moment.

"Well, my father was from Aelborne Continent, and my mother is from Dartilia, but I was born in Nylm Hills. I think my mother's mother was from Nylm, or her mother's mother. I'm not sure. Why?"

Chahara shook her head, waving her hand. "No reason. I just thought you were from a different city here in Feesia."

"Oh." Khaly frowned, not understanding the significance. Maybe there was none, but she thought she saw something more than curiosity cross Chahara's face. She was tired though, and it could have been exhaustion.

"Tell me." Chahara was packing up the tools strewn about. "When you took your aptitude tests, did you score high in anything other than robotics?"

"I did pretty well in all the categories." She shrugged, carrying the dragon over to the storage cabinet.

"Did they send you for additional testing?" Chahara replaced the spare parts in the other storage cabinet. When she returned, Khaly was watching her.

"Why?" Khaly knew something wasn't right. Her instinct was to immediately stop talking, but she trusted Chahara; she was her friend. Although, this line of questioning was odd.

"No reason, just curious. I've heard people from your continent tend to get retested because they score so high." She shrugged as she closed and locked the storage door.

"Oh, well, not me. Just one test." Khaly smiled. "I'm glad though, as those tests were brutal!" She grabbed her bag and coat, following Chahara out of the lab.

"Well, thank you for your help tonight, Khaly. I'm sure I can get it sorted tomorrow."

They waved goodbye as Chahara stepped into the elevator and Khaly made a beeline for the stairs. On her way home, her thoughts drifted to her school project.

With Sumora's exoskeleton almost complete she had no idea what to expect. Was this creature going to be fully alive, or just a mechanical dragon? She and

Bancroft had no clue as to what they were going to do, or how they were going to explain they had no project to hand in at the end of the year. They couldn’t give Sumora to the school.

CHAPTER NINE

"Ms. Hamons? Ms. Hamons?"

The deep voice rang in Khaly's mind, and she felt a nudge in the ribs. She shook herself out of her trance to find her class staring at her.

"Huh? Wha— What was the question?"

Laughter broke out, and Khaly caught Jahallah's smirk. Khaly was exhausted. She had received a message from Chahara, begging for further help with the dragon. After the night she shorted out the circuits, she could no longer get it to work. Khaly felt partially responsible, so she had agreed to help out. Every other night, for three weeks, Khaly snuck out to help Chahara, but found most of the time was spent with her answering odd questions about her old school. She was asked questions about her mother, and if her mother had ever been tested twice for the aptitudes.

The night before had been no different, but when she got home from the lab she had a difficult time getting Sumora calmed down. She had made a mess of Khaly's room; she had knocked everything off of her desk, torn up her pillow, and ripped her mattress apart. She and her mother then had a conversation about her father's lab dragon again. Her mother asked, in a nonchalant manner, if it was yet working.

Her mother had then alluded to the question of whether or not she was having the same issues with the dragon in the lab as she was having with her class project. When Khaly asked her to clarify, her mother rushed her out the door.

Mr. Metayer crossed his arms. "When will you be handing in your final project? It is due in three weeks, and most of your classmates have already handed theirs in."

"Oh, uh…" She turned to Bancroft, whose eyes widened. The fear she saw there mirrored the fear in the pit of her stomach. "We, uh, still have some bugs to work out. You'll have it in time though, Mr. Metayer, I promise."

“Very well. Now, my astute scholars, with the end of the…”

Khaly turned to Bancroft, resting her head on her hand to try to conceal the fact she was talking. “What are we going to do?”

Bancroft gave a slow, tiny shake of his head before whispering, “I have no idea.” He had barely moved his mouth, but she understood him.

“I think my mother knows.”

“What do you mean?” His voice was louder than she would have liked, and she tried to hush him so not to bring attention.

“She keeps dropping hints, telling me to be careful about what you and I talk about and to whom.”

“Ms. Hamons, is there something you would like to share with the rest of your peers?”

“No, sir. I was just setting up a time for Bancroft and me to finish our project.”

Mr. Metayer watched her for a moment before turning back to the board.

“I’m certain she’s seen Sumora.” Khaly said, also returning to her conversation. “She said that night the neighbors were complaining about the noise. Then she told me to warn you—”

“Ms. Hamons, I believe I liked it better when you were snoring.” The class erupted with laughter. “I will speak with you after class.”

“Yes, sir.”

Again, he turned to the board. Bancroft pushed a piece of paper across their table. *Lunch, out front.*

She tucked it into her binder and responded with a quiet, “Uh-huh.”

Khaly sat waiting for the hour to be over, struggling to stay awake. The long night, Sumora refusing to let her sleep when she returned home, was taking its toll. Just to the side of their table, a light tapping came from the window. The class turned their attention to it, but Bancroft was out of his seat before anyone could react.

“What is *that*?” one of her fellow classmates yelled out.

“Man,” Khaly moaned as she joined Bancroft at the window.

“What are yo—”

“Ms. Hamons, Mr. Kingsford, take your seats.”

“Oh, gods! What are we going to do?” Bancroft whispered. Sumora sat on the

window ledge, her nose against the glass.

It was happening so quickly Khaly could barely think. “Go home, Sumora. Bad dragon,” she whispered.

Only seconds after Khaly joined Bancroft did the other students come to see what was at the window. It was nothing short of a miracle when Sumora took flight, disappearing from sight by the time everyone else got there.

“Just a bird,” Bancroft said. “That’s all.” The rest of the class moaned and took their seats.

However, when Khaly sat back down, she noticed Mr. Metayer was still looking out the window. When he pulled his eyes away they landed squarely on hers. It was a suspicious look, a knowing look. Khaly swallowed hard, trying to maintain a neutral face, but his eyes seemed to bore into her.

“All right, class. I’m feeling a little generous today. You may all go now.”

The room exploded with excitement at having a full half hour before their next class. Khaly and Bancroft exchanged knowing looks. They had to get out of the school and ensure Sumora was no longer on the grounds.

“Mr. Kingsford, Ms. Hamons. I would like to speak with you, please.” Mr. Metayer waved them to his podium.

“Man,” Khaly breathed. “Yes, Mr. Metayer?” Khaly asked as they stopped in front of him.

He waited until the last student left the room. “You saw what was at the window?”

Bancroft slowly nodded his head, but Khaly remained still.

“You claimed it was a bird, Mr. Kingsford?”

“Yeah, bird-like…I mean, it had wings and stuff. ’Cause how else would it get to a third story-window, right? I mean, I guess it could have climbed up the building. It had claws—” He mimicked them with his hands.

“It had claws?” Mr. Metayer’s interest was piqued.

Khaly grimaced.

“Well…not exactly claws,” Bancroft stuttered out his response. “More like… talons…”

“I see, and did this bird have a beak?”

“No, of course not.” Bancroft snorted at the thought of Sumora with a beak,

then attempted to recover. “I mean, yes, yes it did. Of course it did, it was a bird. Right?”

Khaly cleared her throat, trying to get him to stop talking, when Mr. Metayer responded.

“Of course.”

Khaly watched Mr. Metayer closely; there was something about the way he was questioning Bancroft. It was as if he knew something. Knew that it was a dragon.

“Uh, Mr. Metayer,” Khaly interrupted. “We should really go. We’ll be late for our next—”

“Next what, Ms. Hamons? I have given you a half hour out of class and you still have...” He looked up at the clock. “Fifteen minutes.” He smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Khaly felt as though he was interrogating them, trying to catch them in their lie. He had been watching them both for a few months now, but she never put much stock into it. Now she was thinking he might be one of those people they needed to be careful of. The warnings her mother gave her, the threats Bancroft felt were coming from the Guild, their being watched—she now believed Mr. Metayer was the one doing the watching.

“No, of course, you’re right.” Khaly worked hard at calming herself and evening out her voice. “But Ban and I—”

“Ban?” Bancroft’s eyebrows came together. “You’ve never call—”

“Ban”—she shot him the evil eye—“and I still have to work out those bugs, and any time we have can be used for that.” She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant.

“Of course.” Mr. Metayer smiled, but it still didn’t reach his eyes. “You may go.”

“Thank you.” Khaly grabbed Bancroft’s wrist and yanked him out of the room. Looking back, she briefly caught Mr. Metayer’s eye, and there was nothing friendly there. She now feared she may no longer be under the Guild’s radar, if she ever was that is.

Khaly released Bancroft’s wrist only when they were several doors down from

Mr. Metayer's class. Without stopping or slowing down, she whisper-shouted, "Are you insane?"

"I know. I'm sorry. When I get nervous…sometimes, I can't stop myself." He now grabbed her wrist, bringing her to a halt. They were standing at an intersection of the hallway. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know, but we can't leave. Now that he suspects us, if we leave—"

"But what about Sumora? If she's still out there we have to get her away from school grounds."

Khaly rubbed her face with both hands, her mind fuzzy. She was so tired. "This can't be happening." She moaned, wishing it was all a dream.

Bancroft grabbed her wrists, forcing her hands down. "Well, it *is* happening, and we need to figure something out before somebody finds that damn dragon!" His voice was shrill, causing the last word to echo. "Oh, gods…" He trailed off as he caught sight of someone at the end of the hall.

At the same moment, Khaly noticed they had company from the opposite direction.

"Mr. Metayer," she whispered.

At the same time Bancroft said, "Jahallah."

They glanced at each other, then down the opposite direction as both intruders disappeared around the corner and into a classroom.

"Did they hear me?" Bancroft's whisper was close to Khaly's ear.

"I hope not."

"This isn't good, Khaly. What do we do?"

"Nothing. We do nothing. We pray Sumora returns home unnoticed, and we act like nothing is different. We go about our day as always."

They held each other's eyes for a long moment. Tears welled in Khaly's, and Bancroft gently grabbed the back of her head as he pulled her into him. She wrapped her arms around him. They held each other until the halls filled with the other students.

CHAPTER TEN

When she got home after school, Khaly was surprised to see her father's company car in the driveway. She started up the front walk but was brought to a sudden halt.

"Where is it, Khaly?" Edwin came out of the house, shouting.

"Where is what?" Caught off guard, she stood in the middle of the path.

"The dragon. What did you do with it?" He was bordering on hysterics. "If my bosses find out it's missing it will be my job. No lab in the world will hire me!"

"Father, I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't have the dragon. I never took it. I haven't touched it since—"

"Edwin, please," her mother said, lightly touching his arm. "The neighbors are watching. If you would like to keep your bosses from finding out, then we need to bring this inside."

He turned abruptly, nearly knocking Hettie over. She pursed her lips and gestured for Khaly to come inside.

"I don't think I want to, Mother," she half whispered.

"Come now, dear." She gestured again for Khaly to enter. Reluctantly, she complied.

"If I find out you have it hidden here..." Her father's face was turning purple from rage.

"I don't have it. You have my word on that." She stood with her back against the door. The second she closed it, Edwin had turned on her.

He threw his hands in the air and walked to the couch, slumping down and placing his head in his hands, elbows resting on his knees.

"What happened?" Khaly sat in the chair across from him.

"What did you do to the dragon when I caught you a few months ago?"

"I-I didn't do anything."

He pursed his lips at her. "Arledge believes that his design has been changed.

That someone is trying to sabotage him. If this is true—”

“It’s not even Arledge’s design,” she said.

“Not this again, Khaly.” He rolled his eyes, leaning back into the couch. “Why would Arledge steal a design from a seventeen-year-old student?”

“Because he has no imagination or skills of his own!” She was tired of this argument as much as he was.

“If you believe he stole the plans, then why would you help him to fix it?” Edwin watched his daughter.

“Because…”—tears began to pool in her eyes—“if the dragon doesn’t start working then you’ll lose your job.”

“Oh, Khaly, that isn’t something you should be worried about. Now, tell me what you did to it.”

She let out a deep sigh, relieved the conversation had begun to calm down. “I only looked at the schematics, and noticed they were unfinished and sloppy. But you caught me before I had time to make any changes.” She paused before adding, quietly, “At that time.”

Giving no indication he had heard her last comment, Edwin nodded.

“It needs a backside bus to connect the CPU to the cache,” they both recited in unison.

Edwin beamed. “You did nothing else? Changed its programming? Fiddled with its—” He stopped, narrowing his eyes. “Did you say ‘*at that time*’?”

“I, uh…” She ever so slightly glanced at her mother. “Um…”

Her father also looked back at her mother, who was still standing by the door. Her arms were crossed, and she showed no sign of backing down.

He turned back to Khaly. “What did you do?”

“Now, Edwin, don’t be angry with Khaly.” Hettie moved into the room, sitting next to her daughter. “She only did what I asked of her.”

“What you—” He stood up, pacing the room, hands on his hips. They watched as he moved back and forth. When he finally stopped he asked, “What did you tell her to do, Hettie?”

“I only asked that she take a look at the design and see if she could fix any issues it may have.”

“Hettie, I have trained technicians.” Both women gave him with a knowing

glance. “I have one trained technician,” he amended. “I’m certain Chahara would have figured it out.”

“Actually, Chahara was there the first night. We worked on it together. She told me she was having a hard time figuring it out and Arledge was blocking her at every turn.”

“The first time? How many times did you go to my lab?” His voice was beginning to rise again.

“A few, but it was always with Chahara. I swear.”

“It was just the software you worked on?”

“Parts of the hardware as well; some of the gears they were using wouldn’t work.” She paused as her father resumed pacing. “What else do you think I’ve done? What happened?”

“Nothing. Go to your room.”

“What, why?”

“Just go.” Edwin raised his voice, pointing to the stairs.

Confused, she looked to her mother for assistance, but she only shook her head, sympathetic. Khaly growled and stomped up the stairs, slamming the door behind her.

Hettie watched as her daughter disappeared up the stairs. When the door slammed shut she settled a glare on Edwin. “Edwin, what is going on? Why would you think Khaly has this dragon of yours?” She sat next to him.

“It’s missing from the lab.”

“Yes, I got that.” She pursed her lips. “What makes you think Khaly took it?”

“I don’t know.”

“And yet you come home accusing your daughter of theft.” Hettie crossed her arms.

“It’s just the way it went missing.”

“How do you mean?” Her eyebrows came together.

“I think it escaped on its own…” His voice trailed off. “I can’t be a hundred percent sure, but we found a hole chewed into the ventilation grill.”

“The hole could have been made by anything, Edwin. Rats, perhaps.”

“No, you don’t understand. Since Khaly made those adjustments it started

behaving rather oddly."

"Odd in what way?"

"Chahara made several observations that it seemed as though the dragon followed her with its eyes when she moved about the lab. Arledge started having fuel and ignition issues, and says it set fire to his lab coat several times. I also swear I saw it leap from a table to the window, but when I turned back it had returned to its original spot."

"I see…and you claim this was after Khaly made her changes?"

"It's not a claim, Hettie."

"Maybe it was Arledge who made the changes and never told you."

"It wasn't him."

"How do you know?"

"I've had suspicions about Arledge for some time, but I could never prove he was incapable of doing his job. There's no way he would have known how to make those changes."

"If you knew the schematics were wrong, then why would you approve them?"

"Arledge went over my head to get the design approved. I would never have allowed the project to move forward with the designs as they were. At first glance, I knew exactly where the issues lay with both the software and the hardware. But by then it was too late to change the designs." He turned to face his wife. "I know Khaly's handiwork. I've seen it enough times to know this was her. And now all these odd behaviors have started."

"The last time she was in your lab was last night, Edwin. How long have these behaviors been happening?"

"She was in the lab last night? I thought she was in her room with all that noise coming from inside. You said she was in her room, working."

"Focus, Edwin." She pursed her lips. "When did the behaviors start to change?"

"A few weeks ago, maybe."

After several minutes of silence Hettie asked, "Have you looked at Khaly and Bancroft's dragon lately?"

"Oh, not you too." He groaned, slumping back into the couch.

Hettie gently touched his knee, bringing his attention back to her. “Well, have you?”

“Only briefly.”

“Before or after they made their adjustments?”

“They made adjustments?”

“Well, they had to. Since Arledge came forward with his design, the children couldn’t very well use theirs.” She watched him drift deep into thought. “Khaly changed the design of the exoskeleton and Bancroft also made some software adjustments. They are working on making it breathe water.”

“Water? What kind of dragon breathes water?”

“Focus, dear.”

“What does this have to do with anything, anyways?”

“I’m just saying that the children have made great strides with their dragon, and that, perhaps, you should take a closer look at their project.”

“Hettie, your word games are only cute in bed—”

“Edwin!” She blushed fiercely, pausing to lower her voice. “Khaly is a descendant of, and native to, the Nylm Hills. Certain traits are bred into those born in the Hills.”

“Hettie, what are you saying?”

“All I’m saying is that if Khaly made the same adjustments to *your* dragon that she did with her own…perhaps you should take a look at hers.”

His eyebrows knit together, but Edwin said nothing.

“I told you about the noise complaints from the neighbors,” she said. “How they thought we had a cat because of the mewling howls during the day.”

Edwin sat straight up, looking about the room as if checking to make sure no one was around. “Hettie, if you’re saying what I—”

“I am.”

“The Guild will have her, and *us*, killed!”

“I know.”

After slamming the door behind her, Khaly threw her bag onto her desk chair. She gritted her teeth, pursed her lips, and squinted into the room. Her curtains were closed but the wind moved them in and out, indicating the window was

open. She and Bancroft hadn’t found Sumora, hoping she returned to Khaly’s room.

Flipping on the light she nearly yelped in surprise. Orantheio was sitting on her bed next to Sumora.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Man." Khaly leaned back on the door, staring at the two dragons. "What the hell am I going to do now?"

Sumora jumped off the bed, approaching Khaly with her low purr. She bent down and scooped her up, running her hand along the joint of the wing where it was attached to the body. She had placed the last piece of the exoskeleton the night before.

"I guess that's what helped you fly out of here today, huh?"

Sumora bumped her forehead against Khaly's.

Khaly noticed she could no longer hear gears whirring inside the dragon. She held her out at arm's length. Sumora's feet and tail dangled unceremoniously, but she didn't stop purring. Khaly pulled her back in, lifting Sumora's chest to her ear. She couldn't hear anything aside from the purring.

"Stop purring for a minute, would ya?"

As if fully understanding, Sumora ceased making a sound.

Khaly listened intently to the dragon's chest, gawking as she pulled her away.

"I hear a heartbeat!" She was practically shouting.

Almost immediately, Sumora started to purr once again.

The two stared at each other, Khaly with her mouth open and Sumora lazily gazing back. A deep, husky growl of sorts came from the bed, pulling Khaly's attention back to the fire dragon. It had no exoskeleton, just the frame that held the software's and hardware's inner workings. The gears spun and whirred within, the wires partially exposed. Sumora started to struggle, and Khaly realized she was still holding her at arm's length. Placing her on the floor she approached Orantheio.

"So much for my theory about the nanites. I never used any on you," she whispered to the dragon, kneeling down in front of it. "My father is looking for you." She rocked back on her heels. "How am I going to explain this?"

“Khaly?” Her mother’s voice came through the door. “Khaly, dear. Your father and I would like to speak with you.”

Her eyes became round as saucers. “Oh no.” Frantic, she picked up the fire dragon. Startled, it spit out a small ball of fire. Khaly yelped in surprise, causing Sumora to jump onto the desk, hissing and increasing her size. The fire dragon struggled in Khaly’s arms, and one of her fingers slipped inside the frame and caught the edge of a gear.

It spat out another ball of fire as Khaly dropped it onto the floor, scorching her carpet. Orantheio backed up under her desk, swishing his metal tail back and forth, clanking it against the wall and leg of the desk.

“Khaly? What’s going on in there?” Her father’s voice came through the door and the knob began to turn.

“Nothing. I just dropped something. I’m not dressed!” She gave a silent plea to Sumora as she opened the closet door.

Sumora visibly sighed and jumped off the desk, landing gently on the floor without a sound.

“Take your friend,” she whispered.

Sumora looked up at Khaly with glassy blue eyes then back to Orantheio, who was crouched under the desk. She let out several clicks, as if impatiently calling it over.

It looked to Khaly then to Sumora, slowly skulking out from under the desk, skirting the bed and side table, and getting around Khaly to follow Sumora into the closet, all the while never lifting itself off the ground more than a few centimeters.

Khaly couldn’t tell if he was angry or scared. With no exoskeleton, it didn’t have the same facial features and expressions as Sumora.

Once in the closet, Khaly pointed a finger at Sumora. “Be good. Keep quiet.” She closed the closet door and hurried to open her door for her parents.

“What’s going on in here?” Her father burst into the room.

“Nothing.”

Her mother’s eyes fell on the scorch mark on the carpet. Khaly noticed, and they gazed at each other for a brief moment. Hettie took in a deep breath, crossed the room, and closed the window, but not before sticking her head out

and looking up and down the street. She did the same at the second window in Khaly's room. Khaly and her father watched as her mother then yanked the curtains shut.

"I told you to be careful." She turned, addressing Khaly. "You need to keep these closed at all times."

Before Khaly could respond there was a small thud from the closet, and what sounded like a hiss. Khaly bit down on her lip, eyebrows coming together with worry as she looked at her mother.

"What was that?" Edwin asked, looking to the closet.

"Uh…"

Another, much louder, thud, followed by a howl, came out. Khaly rushed to the door, unsure if Orantheio would start a fire if Sumora spooked him or ticked him off.

Before flinging the door open she looked at her father. "Don't be mad. And no sudden moves." She then yanked it open to reveal Sumora perched on the top shelf, looking down at Orantheio. They were just in time to watch the fire dragon set one of her pants on fire, the water dragon spitting to put it out.

"Holy Hanna!" Edwin yelped, looking to Hettie who seemed to think nothing of what was happening.

"Oh, for the love of the gods," she said, stepping up to Khaly. "They've been at this all day."

"All day?" Khaly and her father shouted in unison.

"You come out of there, you little pyromaniac." Hettie scolded the fire dragon, ignoring her family's response. "And you." She looked up at Sumora, who sat up smacking her lips and stomping her front feet. "Good girl, now come on down from there."

Khaly's father slumped down on the bed as Orantheio stalked out of the closet, his footsteps heavy. Sumora jumped down from the top shelf, spreading her wings to land softly on the bed next to him. While Edwin gaped at the two dragons, Khaly was watching her mother.

"You knew?" she said.

"Of course I knew, dear. I don't work. If the neighbors heard noises, I heard noises." Pulling up the desk chair she sat down. "I've been doing my best to

keep this dragon quiet, but she doesn't like being alone. So, I've had her following me around the house for the past few months. It's difficult to keep her away from the windows but, as long as she kept her wings tucked in, the neighbors believed she was a cat. Until a few days ago."

"What happened a few days ago?" Khaly asked as she watched her father.

Sumora sat as close as she could get without touching him, staring while Orantheio nipped at the thread sticking out of his sock.

"She got out. I caught her lying in the sun on the back porch, wings spread out. Ever since, I've had difficulty keeping her indoors."

"Yeah, she showed up outside my homeroom class this morning, sitting on the windowsill."

"Did anyone see?" Hettie's voice wavered with a hint of panic.

"I'm not really sure, but Mr. Metayer asked us a lot of questions."

"He didn't notice?" Edwin asked carefully, lifting his foot away from Orantheio just as Sumora placed her front foot on his arm. "Oh my…" Panic rose in his eyes.

"Sumora, come on, leave him alone." Khaly shooed her away. Sumora clicked at her and walked to the opposite end of the bed. "Don't talk back." She then turned her attention to Orantheio. Unsure how to handle it, she used her foot to gently nudge him away.

"Uh, dear—" Her mother couldn't finish before a small ball of flame came from his mouth and set her father's pant leg on fire.

"Oh my gods!" Khaly yelled.

Edwin yelped, waving his leg to put out the flame, when a shot of water came from the other end of the bed. It soaked his leg and sock, as well as a large portion of Khaly's bed.

"You need to watch for that one; he seems to be a little skittish and temperamental. Perhaps it's the lack of skin."

"What is going on here?" Edwin shouted, trying to stand up. Orantheio took an aggressive stance, forcing Edwin back in his seat.

"It appears Khaly has an Elemental Gift," her mother stated, matter-of-fact. "She seems to have brought these creatures to life."

"How?"

“Khaly, why don’t you explain?” her mother gently prompted.

Before she could start there was a small *tink!* at her window. All three turned to look.

“That must be Bancroft,” Khaly whispered.

“Why does he not just come to the front door?” Edwin said. Khaly noticed his jaw was clenched.

“It’s too dangerous, dear,” Hettie said, moving to the window. She opened it gently, causing Bancroft to scurry back into the shadows. The sun set much earlier now it was the winter season; it was only six p.m. but it was as dark as midnight. “Use the back door, dear, and come right up.”

The three waited, looking at one another. Moments later, Bancroft stepped into the room. He wouldn’t have noticed the fire dragon had it not spit a ball of flame just as he walked in.

“What the—” He jumped back, narrowly missing the blaze.

“Uh, yeah. Meet Orantheio,” Khaly said.

“How did…Where did…You built a new one?”

“Not exactly.”

“It’s from my lab,” Edwin said.

“Then what’s it doing here?” He looked to Khaly, lowering his voice. “Is this one…You know?”

“Alive,” Khaly said it loud and clear. Bancroft flinched.

“Yes, Bancroft, we know,” Hettie said.

“Apparently, Sumora here has made it her business to hang out with my mother for the last few months.” Khaly gave a disapproving glare at the water dragon, now sitting on her pillow.

“Oh gods, really?” He looked down at the newest dragon, which had backed its self into a corner. “And this one? When did you bring him home, Mr. Hamons?”

“I didn’t. It appears it took it upon itself to bring itself home.”

“I don’t understand how it knew to come here.” Khaly put her hands on her hips, and all eyes in the room now watched the skittish fire-breather.

“Perhaps it followed your dad home.” Bancroft shrugged. “When did you notice it missing?”

“Huh?” Edwin thought for a moment. “Only this morning. It is possible it followed me home last night.”

“He was sitting on the back step when I went down for my morning coffee,” Hettie said. “It would make sense. I let it in only because she was insistent. But the creature has been starting fires all around the house. If it weren’t for—” Hettie pointed.

“Sumora,” Khaly said.

“Right, sorry, Sumora, the house would have burned down.”

“Maybe there’s a glitch in the software? There could be a short,” Bancroft said, bending down to pick it up. The dragon pushed itself further into the corner, letting out a low growl. Khaly grabbed his arm.

“You don’t want to do that. I don’t think it’s a software glitch, I think it’s just either *really* terrified, or spiteful. Either way, it’s best to let it be.”

The room fell silent once again. Bancroft pulled back and slumped against the wall.

“How?” Edwin practically shouted, causing everyone to jump and Orantheio to set Khaly’s hamper on fire.

Before anyone could respond, Sumora jumped off the bed and extinguished the flame. She then sat in front of Orantheio, watching him intently and swishing her tail.

“She’s been doing that all day as well. Well, except when she disappeared for a bit. I got the impression he went to sleep and she decided to rest herself. Little did I know she left the house altogether. Perhaps she was trying to get you to come home early.”

“Again, I ask, how?” Edwin’s struggle to keep his voice calm was apparent to everyone.

“How what, Edwin?”

“How are they alive?”

Khaly scratched her head. “Well, originally, I thought it was the nanites, because after putting the first scale on Sumora she seemed to come to life.” She looked down at Orantheio. “But I never used nanites on him. So, I don’t know.”

“What did you name the water dragon?” Hettie asked, now beginning to stand.

“Sumora.”

“The ancient Nylm word for water,” she said, more to herself. “And the other one; did you name him?”

“Yeah, Orantheio.”

“Nylm for fire.” She fell silent, her eyes losing focus.

“Hettie?”

“When did Orantheio start to behave differently in the lab?”

“I told you, a few weeks ago,” Edwin said.

“And, Khaly, when did you name him?”

“Around the same time, I think.”

Hettie stood as if in a trance, looking down at the two dragons. She was deep in thought but then turned to Bancroft, who slid down the wall and sat on the floor.

“Why a dragon?” She asked.

“Um…”

“He had a dream,” Khaly said.

“A dream?” Hettie knelt down to his level. “Really? What did you dream?”

“Uh, I saw Khaly with a dragon on her shoulder. She was standing on a hill, the sky red with flames as the city burned.”

“You never told me that part,” Khaly said.

“How many dragons did you see?” her mother asked, ignoring Khaly.

“Just the one.”

She nodded, again slipping into a trance.

“Hettie, what does it matter now? We have two mechanical dragons—”

“One, Father. We have one mechanical dragon. Sumora has developed a heartbeat.”

“Dear gods…” The room remained silent for a few tense minutes. “You still didn’t answer my question though, Hettie.”

“Which one?”

“How are they real?”

“Khaly is a child of Nylm Hills; she was born there, as was her grandmother and her grandmothers’ mother before her. She has the gift of life, the Elemental of Fire. Dragons are born of the hills as well. Centuries ago, they lived with the Nylm people. After the Sage Wars they were believed to be extinct. The ancient

Nylm language was that of the dragons, and spoken only to them. When Khaly named the dragons, she cast a spell and brought them to life."

"But I learned those words in school. They taught all of us how to speak ancient Nylm."

Hettie gave a knowing smile. "Yes, and some children showed signs of the Elemental. They were taken and hidden, so the Guild couldn't find them."

"Then, why wasn't I taken away?"

"Because you didn't show any sign of the Gifts," Edwin said.

"So, what now?" Bancroft asked. "Mr. Metayer is already suspicious of us. He stopped me in the hall after school and asked more questions about the '*bird*' I said I saw," he said, nodding his head toward Sumora.

"Metayer?" Hettie squinted at Khaly. "Regnauld Metayer?"

"Uh…yeah, I think so. Why?" Khaly shrugged.

Hettie looked at Edwin, both their expressions showing concern.

"How did we not know this?" Hettie asked him. "How did we not realize he was at her school?"

"Mr. Metayer is new. This is his first year."

"If he's here," her father said, skimming past Khaly's comment, "then there must be more. They must suspect other children."

"What are you two talking about?" Khaly looked from one to the other.

"Khaly, Bancroft, Regnauld Metayer is a known cooperative of the Guild. He is a spy, a turncoat. If he gets real proof that you children have Elemental Gifts, he will inform the Guild of it."

"My brother—" Bancroft said.

"Yes, I know, dear. He is on our side, though. He works for the underground movement."

"I don't understand any of this." Khaly threw her hands up and dropped onto the bed next to her father. Her movement triggered another ball of fire from a terrified Orantheio but Sumora was quick on the draw and spit water at the same time, soaking the fire dragon. Steam rose off his exposed gears, causing him to squawk and push himself further into the corner.

"I think that hurt him," Bancroft said. "Maybe we should get some scales made for him—and quick. That could be why he's so jumpy."

Khaly stood up from the bed, careful not to make any sudden movements. Moving to the desk she pulled some raw materials from the desk drawer, noting there was only enough for two. She added them into the box containing the nanites, activating them.

“They’ll be done by morning, but I need some more material.”

“What kind of material are you using?” Edwin asked.

Khaly scrunched her face. “Golinum,” she said softly.

“Golinum. That’s an expensive metal. Where did you get it?” Realization crossed his face, followed by a stern stare. “Khaly, did you take it from the lab?”

“You weren’t using any of it. Once you discovered that robot man needed a denser alloy I took it, but only some.”

“Of course.” Khaly’s mother smiled, laughing softly.

“Hettie?”

“It is all dropping into place, Edwin. Her gift, the Nylm names, and the alloy she used for their skin.”

“I-I don’t get it,” Bancroft said, watching as Sumora slowly made her way over.

“Golinum can only be mined from the Nylm Hills, within the depths of the caves where the dragons once lived.”

Before Bancroft could respond Sumora put her front foot on his knee, tucking the other under and sniffing in his direction. “Uh, Khaly, she’s doing it again.”

“Sumora, be nice.” Khaly sighed.

Sumora was developing a habit of intimidating Bancroft in one way or another. Most times she would sit and stare without touching him, but other times it was like she was trying to scare or taunt him. Sumora didn’t back down like normal this time. Placing her other foot on his thigh she sniffed and moved closer, directing her attention to his chest pocket.

“Sumora, come on, leave him be.” Khaly turned back to her father. “So, can you get me some more?”

“I’ll do my best.” Edwin sighed. “But I need to figure out—”

There was a yelp and a clicking sound coming from behind. Sumora dove at Bancroft, her head disappearing under his jacket. Before anyone could act, she

reemerged with a tin wrapper. Jumping off his lap, she strut across the room, only briefly glancing toward Orantheio before then jumping onto the bed.

“What is that?” Khaly asked.

“My lobster sandwich from lunch today.” The four watched as Sumora tore into the tin wrapper and started munching on the sandwich.

“Well.” Hettie proclaimed, standing up. “Bancroft, you should head home. Khaly, try to get some rest. Your father and I have some planning to do. We need to figure out how to get this one,” she said, pointing at Orantheio, who was still backed into the corner, “back to your father’s lab, or at least a facsimile.”

“How can you be so calm?” Khaly asked.

“Somebody needs to be,” she said, shooing everyone else out of the room and leaving Khaly alone with the two dragons.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chahara eyed Edwin as he shoved the golinum into his bag; he thought he was alone in the lab, having come in a few hours earlier than the others. He turned, coming nose to nose with her.

“Good morning, sir.” She smiled politely. “Can I help you find anything?”

“No, no. I’m fine, Chahara. I was just checking to see what supplies need to be ordered. I’m just writing them down in my note—” Realizing he didn’t have his notepad he stopped, blushing.

“I see. It seems you’ve forgotten that notepad of yours, sir.”

“What’s that? Ah yes, well, I have a pretty good memory.” He tapped his temple with his forefinger. “I should go write things down though, fill out those acquisition forms.” He stepped around her.

“We still can’t find that dragon, sir.” Chahara followed him to the lab door. “It’s strange how it just up and disappeared. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes, strange. I’ll have to speak with security to see if they noticed anything odd.” Without turning to face her Edwin quickly stepped through the doors and sped to his office, sweat dripping down his face. He wasn’t good under this type of pressure; the fear of getting caught or, worse, of Khaly getting caught.

He himself didn’t have an Elemental, nor did his bloodline; at least that he knew of. He was aware Hettie and her family had a strong bloodline with Elemental Gifts. In the Nylm Hills, the bloodlines were powerful. This was mostly due to not many families straying from the area, whereas families from other continents scattered around the world.

On most of Usmiri’s continents the history of the Sage Wars had been passed down from generation to generation, along with the knowledge of the Elemental Gifts. When the Guild was formed decades after the wars, those with robust bloodlines began to hide members of their families who showed the Gifts.

Elementals were feared because of what they could do, and wars were caused when the greater families tried to gain power. In the process, they destroyed cities and killed millions. The Guild didn't know how to control those with the gifts so, instead, they executed them in hopes of preventing another war.

To this day, after twenty years of marriage, it was never clear to Edwin if Hettie actually was an Elemental or not. She never spoke of it; which he believed was because he was not native to Nylm. He was from the Aelborne Continent, and many of the stories from the war were simply fairy tales and myths.

There was a firm quick knock on his door. Edwin jumped, letting a small yelp escape from his lips. He grabbed a handkerchief from his pocket, wiping the sweat from his face and hastily yanking off his coat. He became entangled in the mess, with his bag still on over his coat. The knock came again.

"Oh, dear gods!" Panicking, he pulled and tugged at the bag's strap and at his coat, finally coming free as a voice followed the next knock.

"Sir, I know you're in there."

"Yes." His voice cracked, so he cleared his throat and tried again. "Yes, come in."

The door flung open. "Sir, I can't find my dragon anywhere!" Arledge was spitting mad. "I believe Chahara is up to her shenanigans once again!" He grabbed the back of the chair in front of Edwin's desk. "I want her fired! Fired!"

"Okay, calm down, Arledge. I'm certain Chahara didn't take the dragon."

"How can you be certain of that?"

Edwin paused and stared at Arledge, his mind racing for a plausible reason the dragon had been gone for two days. Finally, he blurt out, "I sent it to be tested."

"Tested?"

"Yes, tested. I…we can't turn in a faulty prototype." He was pleased with himself for thinking so quickly.

"But I was going to test it."

"I, uh…" Beads of sweat again started to form on his forehead. "Right, well, I thought it best a different department tested it; an unbiased party." He watched Arledge, knowing he wasn't buying it at all. "Go back to the lab and start

working on an exoskeleton.” He did his best to shoo him out of the office with authority.

As Arledge began to leave, Edwin realized he hadn’t given the same story to Chahara and panic rose once again. Quickly, he added, “And don’t talk to Chahara about this. There is enough tension between the two of you.”

Khaly and Bancroft sat in the far corner of the cafeteria, bent over old schematics for the dragon. They hoped, with everyone already aware their project wasn’t near completion, this meeting would bring no unwanted attention. After yesterday’s incident in class, the conversation in the hallway, and the meeting they had with her parents, it seemed more eyes were now trained on them.

“If we just build a crude version of the dragon.” Khaly tried to keep her voice low. “Then we can pass it off as our unfinished project. I’m sure I can put it together in less than a week. We’ll just use the old processing chips you made, and it will at the very least walk.”

“That might be the best bet, and maybe you don’t name this one.” A tiny grin formed on his lips.

Khaly nodded but only sighed.

Bancroft was watching the room over Khaly’s shoulder, ensuring no one got too close. “What about Orantheio? What are we going to do about him? How is your dad going to explain that? Plus, what about him setting everything on fire?”

“I’m certain that has to do with the lack of skin. Like you said, whenever anything gets too close to his outer shell, he spits fire. I’m just glad Sumora is keeping an eye on him.”

“What about my vision?” Bancroft started, then clamped his lips shut.

“Hey, losers.” Jahallah approached their table, her three friends in tow.

“This is a private conversation, Jahallah.”

“Ah, do you not have your project finished?” She mocked them, placing her hands on the table inches from the edge of the drawings. She leaned forward. “You should have stuck with something more in your skill set. Like a clock.” She straightened up, but not before snatching the drawing and pulling it to the end of the table. Khaly grabbed at it before she pulled it right off. “Catch you

later, losers.” She met Bancroft’s eyes, then looked down in earnest at their schematic, as if speaking silently, before turning. She and her friends laughed as they strolled away.

“I would love to sic Orantheio on her ass.” Khaly looked at Bancroft, still watching Jahallah. “Uh, hello? Bancroft?” She leaned over to obstruct his view.

He focused in on her after a moment. “Yeah, that would be interesting.”

“What were you going to say before they interrupted us?”

“My vision.”

“What about it?” Khaly leaned back in her chair while Bancroft leaned further over the table.

“The burning city? There is a war coming, Khaly.”

“You don’t know that for sure.” She sat back up, hoping he was wrong about that part of his dream—but his vision was right about her having a dragon.

“What else could it have been? My visions are never wrong.”

“Look, my mother said she and my father are working on a plan. It’ll be fine. We just need to worry about all this.” She sprawled her hands over the schematics. The bell signaling the end of lunch rang, and Khaly grabbed her bag as Bancroft started to fold up the drawings. A small, folded piece of paper slipped out from beneath them.

“What is that?”

Bancroft snatched it up and opened it. “A note from Jahallah.” He was dumbfounded.

“A note?” Khaly turned in her seat just in time to see Jahallah glance back before leaving the cafeteria. “What’s it say?” she asked, turning back to him.

Bancroft unfolded it, keeping it low to the table. He read the note before reading it again, his eyes wide.

“Well, what’s it say?”

“Need to talk to you. Saw the dragon. Eyes everywhere,” he said. Hastily, he folded the paper and jammed it into his pocket. “What do we do?”

“We go talk to her.” Khaly shrugged and finished folding the schematics.

“What if it’s a trap?” he whispered.

“Then we’ll be very careful not to say anything to incriminate ourselves.”

“Khaly, are you insane? I mean, you must be, if you think it’s a good idea to

meet up with Jahallah. Of all people, she would be a spy! I mean, she lives just down the street from me. How do I know her family didn't move in to spy on us?"

"Because she lived there for years before you moved in."

"Well, that doesn't change anything." He followed her as she walked to the door.

"Does it say when she wants to meet up?"

"Yeah, it's on the bottom."

"All right then. We don't want to stand her up now, do we?" Khaly smiled as she pushed the cafeteria doors open.

"How can you be so calm?"

"Someone has to be."

"You sound like your mother."

Khaly smiled. *Then that's not too shabby.*

Khaly stamped her feet to warm up. The temperature was brisker than normal. The sun had set long ago, and she had had to sneak out of the house. Her father was afraid they were being more closely watched, since the dragon still hadn't been located. Pulling her hands out of her pockets she blew on them to help warm them up.

"Man. I wish I thought of bringing my gloves."

Bancroft eyed the bandage on her hand. "What happened to you?"

"What? Oh, Orantheio was a little temperamental when I tried to add his first two scales. I had to drag him out from under my desk by the tail. He didn't like that much."

"I guess the corner wasn't as appealing to him as last night."

"I think he feels more secure under there. He slept there last night, and mother said he stays there all day. As long as he doesn't set my room on fire, I'm okay with that." She readjusted the bandage on her hand, pushing it back in her pocket. "I'll have to wear oven mitts to handle him tomorrow."

"Did your dad get more—" There was a rustle from the bushes and they froze, hoping they couldn't be seen.

"I can see your silhouettes," Jahallah's snarky voice came through the dark.

“You two need to figure out how to be stealthier. Come on.” She started for the tree line down the path.

A tiny building came into view the further they went. There were no lights on, and the place looked deserted. Jahallah stopped and opened the lock. Pushing the door inward, she waved the other two ahead of her. Khaly hesitated for a moment, eying her.

“Come on, loser. We don’t have all night.”

Khaly gritted her teeth and was about to say something when Bancroft grabbed her elbow, pulling her into the little shack. Once inside, Jahallah looked about before closing the door. She then made her way to the center of the room, tapping the wood with her toe until there was a clicking sound. A small lighted panel glowed green in the dark room.

“Dear gods,” Bancroft breathed.

Jahallah punched in a series of numbers on a keypad and a hatch popped open. It was smooth and made no sound. “Come on.” Again she waved the two into the underground passage.

Hesitant, Khaly stepped down the hole, followed by Bancroft, then Jahallah, who closed the hatch behind them.

“I can’t see,” Khaly whispered.

“Just hold on.” As the words came from Jahallah’s mouth, small lamps lining the walls lit up. They were at the top of a staircase. The lighting was dim, but there was enough light to find their way.

After a while it felt like they had been walking for an hour, diving deeper and deeper into the earth. Khaly could smell the soil surrounding them. The walls were crudely cut, the steps carved from the earth itself. The lamps were attached, a long cord drooping between each one. She finally reached level ground and stopped abruptly, causing Bancroft to run into her.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered in her ear.

“Keep going!” Jahallah pushed from the back.

Khaly turned in the tiny space to look up at her. “You first.” Now feeling entirely too vulnerable, she wished she heeded Bancroft’s earlier warning about this being a trap.

“Fine.” Jahallah shoved Bancroft into the wall, causing him to expel the

remaining air from his lungs. She then pushed past Khaly, giving her a dirty look. Without stopping, she continued down the narrow, badly lit corridor. It was only fifty paces until they reached a much wider space, but no lights were in this area. It was pitch black; nothing could be seen. Khaly's stomach clenched in an uneasy knot. She reached for Bancroft's hand, and he gripped it tight. His heavy breathing told Khaly he was also getting nervous about the situation they had put themselves in.

Jahallah disappeared into the dark. Khaly squinted and tried to follow her, but she couldn't get her eyes to adjust. There was a quiet hiss and a pop, then the room was lit up. A bulb hung from the ceiling, brighter than the rest of the lanterns, but still not reaching the corners of the room, leaving them cast in shadow. They were in a roughly carved square box. The ceiling was low, making the room feel more confined.

There was a small, unsteady looking table and two chairs in a back corner. A shelving unit, filled with old tomes, stood near it. On the other side was a couch made mostly of wood, or perhaps dirt, with ratty looking cushions laid out. Two other chairs sat opposite the couch, also made of roughly cut dark wood but without cushions. The other corner had a few cabinets, and a tea kettle and some mugs sat on the counter.

Khaly and Bancroft exchanged confused, but more relaxed, looks.

"Sit. We don't have a lot of time before my absence is noticed. My house has been under tight watch for the last month. It seems there has been some activity down the street from me as well." She looked pointedly at Bancroft while taking a seat in one of the chairs.

Khaly and Bancroft took a seat on the couch.

"What is this place?" Khaly asked, wrapping her arms around herself. It was cold on the surface, but being underground made her feel as if she was in a freezer.

"My father and uncle built it about twenty years ago. It is, or rather *was,* used by the underground movement in this city."

"Was?" Bancroft asked. Khaly could hear the apprehension in his voice.

"It's not very big," Khaly said, looking about.

"Of course not. Do you think they would have a big hoopla every week? Don't

be stupid. Obviously your Elemental isn't Air," she said.

"You know what, you stuck up—"

"Okay, ladies." Bancroft put up his hands, stopping the mini war that was likely to break out. "Why are we here?"

Jahallah sat up straighter, smoothing down her coat and tilting up her chin. "After your dragon showed up at school, the Guild has kicked into high gear."

"What dragon?" Khaly tried to cover, but knew it was of no use.

"Knock it off, Khaly. We don't have time for this." Jahallah's voice had a small shake behind it.

"Well, I don't know what you're talking about. Do you, Bancroft?" Khaly tried her best to keep her face neutral.

"They took my mother," Jahallah said to Bancroft. "I'm certain they know about me. I think one of my friends told Mr. Metayer about my Elemental." Now her voice shook, the betrayal showing in her eyes.

"*Your* Elemental?" Khaly's eyebrows knit together.

"You're so stupid, Khaly!" Jahallah spat. "It's even more obvious that your Elemental is *not* Air!"

"No, mine is," Bancroft said. "She's Fire."

"Bancroft," Khaly shouted.

"What's yours?" he asked.

"Earth."

The three sat in silence, contemplating each other and trying to determine if they could trust each other.

"When did they take your mom?" Bancroft's voice was quiet, barely audible.

Jahallah stared at her hands, picking at the edge of her thumbnail. "A few days ago. I came home from Darla's and there were these men in cloaks which bore the circle with two waves. They dragged her from our home. They were looking for me."

"Are you sure they were looking for you?"

"It only makes sense. I mean, I showed Darla what I could do. Then, two days later, they take my mom. Then, yesterday, your dragon shows up and Mr. Metayer starts questioning me to see if I know anything about this '*bird*'." She made finger quotes around the word to emphasize it.

“What did you show her?” The conversation seemed to just be between Jahallah and Bancroft. Khaly sat in silence, trying to understand. It felt like she was the only one who wasn’t raised in this world.

“I showed her how I could make trees and stones grow.”

“You make stones grow?” Khaly chimed in.

Jahallah brought her face to Khaly’s, her expression cold. “How are you so stupid? You Fire Elementals, up in your mountains, do you spend all day banging your heads against rocks?” Her voice rose.

“Hey,” Khaly yelled back. “I don’t have to take your abuse. Your problems don’t have anything to do with me.” She made to stand up when Bancroft grabbed her arm.

“They do, Khaly,” he said, his voice soft and quiet.

“How?” She pulled her arm free.

“We’re both under constant surveillance, Khaly. Mr. Metayer is a spy for the Guild, your mother said so herself.” He turned to Jahallah as Khaly returned to her seat. “She wasn’t raised with the knowledge we have, Jahallah. As far as she knew, all this was a fairy tale. So cut her some slack, would ya?”

“Fine.” She turned to Khaly. “All Elemental Gifts have more than one ability, known as active and passive. As I said, I’m Earth. My active Elemental allows me to change and manipulate elements of wood, stone, and earth. My passive power is that I can see through some animal’s eyes. Mostly birds.” She looked at Bancroft, inviting him to take over.

“I have premonitions and a photographic memory, which allows me to learn at a faster rate. I can also bend air.”

“Bend air?” Khaly furrowed her brow.

“I can collect it.” He teetered his hands back and forth in a *so-so* manner. “It’s difficult to explain. I haven’t quite got it down yet.”

“He can blow things around without touching them,” Jahallah said blandly.

“Like telekinesis?” Khaly asked.

“Not quite. I don’t have that kind of control. In theory, I can blow things up.” He grinned at the prospect.

“What about me?” Khaly asked. “What can fire do?”

“Fire is a pretty powerful gift. You can be the creator of life and death. Much

of what Fire Elementals can do is shrouded in mystery. You are the people of the dragons, which is pretty powerful. It's said you can hold more than one Elemental." Bancroft paused. "That's how you brought the two dragons to life."

"*Two* dragons?" Jahallah stood up unexpectedly. "We should go, the Guild agents will start to take notice we're all missing at the same time."

"How could they possibly know that?" Khaly asked as she stood.

Jahallah rolled her eyes. "They're Spirit Elementals."

"That hasn't been proven. Flocara was lost during the Sage Wars. There were no survivors from that continent," Bancroft said.

"Whatever. Believe whatever you want. You damn Air's think you know everything." She started for the switch to turn off the light. "Let's go."

"Does that mean all Earth's are arrogant, self-important jerks?" Khaly screamed. Jahallah was about to respond when Khaly continued. "How do we know we can trust you?"

"How do *I* know if you can be trusted?" Jahallah shot back.

"Are you kidding? I think we have more to be concerned about than you do."

"Okay, ladies." Bancroft stood between them. "I think we can agree we all have lives at stake here. We just need to keep acting normal and be really careful about how often we talk."

"Well, you shouldn't have any issues going back to being—"

"Khaly, not helping."

There was a long, silent stare down between the girls.

Bancroft started to fidget. "I think we should go," he finally said.

Khaly started for the exit, while Jahallah turned off the lights and Bancroft followed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KHALY OPENED THE FRONT DOOR to a full house. It was past ten, which was why it was odd her parents had company. She smiled and caught her mother's eye. Even though Hettie returned the smile there was something underneath that told Khaly things weren't right.

"Khaly, dear. How was your evening run?"

"Uh...good." She wasn't sure what was happening.

Edwin came out of the kitchen, carrying a tray of mugs. She crinkled her brow and he gave his head a subtle shake, warning her not to say anything. There was a thump then a squawk from upstairs. Hettie let out a nervous laugh as Edwin's eyes grew wider, sweat forming on his brow.

"Khaly, dear, next time you leave make sure you turn off your silly contraptions. I haven't been able to get them to turn off since you left."

"Right, okay. Sorry, Mother. I'll go take care of that now." As she was about to put her foot on the first step, one of the men stood up.

"I would very much like to see this contraption you've been working on. I understand you attend Pifianka Academy of Polytechnics."

"Yes, that's right." Her eyes fell upon the crest on the man's cloak; two waves over a circle.

"You must have your year-end project finished. I would like to see it." He gestured to his colleagues. "I think that we would all like to have a look at the robot you've created." He smiled wide. "Why don't you bring it down?" There was something in his smile that forced a chill down Khaly's spine. She glanced at her mother and father for some sort of assistance, but their fear caused her stomach to knot.

"Of course." She swallowed back the lump of terror in her throat. "I'll go get it." She started up the stairs, her mind racing. The Guild was in her house. *Are*

they going to take me away? Take my family? She stepped into her room, shutting the door quickly.

Sumora was sitting on the desk chair looking down at Orantheio, who had dove under the desk. She let out an uneasy breath and got down on her knees, bringing her head level with Sumora who leaned in for a head bump. Tears started to well in Khaly's eyes. Her family's fate depended on the terrified and fidgety fire dragon. She had no choice but to use him, since in no way was Sumora any longer mechanical.

As she somehow knew what was happening Sumora jumped off of the chair, landing silently in front of Khaly. She then stepped under the desk, lying flat in front of Orantheio.

His un-lidded eyes settled on Sumora. Lowering his head, he lay flat like the water dragon. They sat for a few minutes before Sumora stood and came out from under the desk, Orantheio hesitantly following. He came to a seated position in front of her; the two scales Khaly had placed on one half of his face seemed to be fusing to his frame. It wasn't quite finished, giving Khaly a bit of relief as it at least wouldn't be hard to explain.

"Okay, my family's lives depend on you." She spoke softly to the fire-starter. "I need to carry you, and I will do my best to ensure they don't touch your inner gears. Feel free to set them on fire if they do. Just don't run away." She hoped Orantheio understood her like Sumora seemed to. Khaly stood and noticed the pile of golinum on her desk. Hastily, she put it in the box with the nanites and started the process. She turned to Sumora.

"I'm begging you to be quiet, Sumora. Begging you." The dragon stamped her front feet, giving several clicks. Khaly took in another deep, unsteady breath and reached down for Orantheio. Acting on reflex he crouched lower, backing up. "You gotta trust me," she whispered. "I will protect you." Finally, he stood and took two steps toward her.

Khaly carefully picked him up, minding her fingers and keeping them on the outside of his casing. She went to the door, giving Sumora one last look. She clicked once and hid in the closet. Khaly left the room, rushing down the hall and then the stairs. Her parents and the three men she assumed were from the Guild sat waiting.

“What took you so long?” one of the men asked, annoyed.

“I was running simulations on the software and had to shut down the program before disconnecting him—it.” She quickly corrected herself. “Don’t want to corrupt my software a week before my assignment is due, now do I?” She tried to adopt a playful tone, but didn’t elicit any smiles.

“Well, come on then, let’s see it,” the first man said, reaching for Orantheio.

Khaly recoiled and placed Orantheio on her far side, away from the man. “Sorry, it still has some loose parts. It’s best if you don’t handle it.”

The man dropped his hands, squinting at her. “Very well,” he said slowly, directing her to the coffee table.

Khaly glanced at her mother, who was chewing on her lower lip. Her father was looking down at the table. She gently placed Orantheio down, running the palm of her hand across the scales on his face in hopes it would be reassuring and help him relax. He stood still, and not even his eyes moved as the three men looked him over. One reached out faster than Khaly or her parents could prevent, touching the gears that worked the wings.

Khaly knew this would be like someone ramming a finger under your own skin and jabbing your bone. The dragon gave a shudder and spat out a ball of flame, setting the third man’s sleeve on fire.

“Holy!” he yelped, jumping to his feet and waving his arm. Hettie sprang to her feet, grabbed a full tea cup, and threw its contents on the man to put the fire out. “What the hell was that?” he screamed. Now everyone was on their feet.

“I’m sorry.” Khaly rushed to pick up Orantheio. “I still have some software glitches to work out. You must have triggered the flame device.” She took a step into the hallway, toward the stairs. “I’ll go work on that now. I’m so sorry, sir.”

Without waiting for anyone to respond she rushed up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Heart pounding, she rushed into her room, slamming the door. She placed Orantheio on the desk and took a seat in the chair.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t fast enough.”

The dragon looked at her, and she felt a pressure on her knee. It was Sumora. Khaly reached to pick her up, and Sumora gave her a head bump. Khaly then made to reach for Orantheio, but he backed away. She pulled her hand back, resting her elbow on the desk. She chewed on the nail of her index finger,

watching him carefully. Her heartstrings pulled and she felt as if she betrayed him, lying about keeping him safe. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Fear was also bubbling inside her. She laid her head down on the desk, tears dripping to the floor. Sumora, still in her lap, nuzzled up to her ear and purred softly. A second later, she felt something heavy on the top of her head. She could hear gears turning and was surprised to find Orantheio. The three sat like that for ten minutes before there was a knock on the door. Without instruction Sumora and Orantheio jumped to the floor; Sumora light and without sound but Orantheio thumped like a lead brick. Khaly stood as the two dragons ran for the closet.

Seconds later the door opened and her mother poked her head through the crack. Khaly took a deep breath, unsure if her mother was alone.

“They’ve left,” she said, as if reading her mind and coming fully into the room. She rushed to the window, closing the curtains tighter. “Your father is out speaking to them now.”

“Why were they here?” Khaly walked to the closet. “Come on out.”

Sumora jumped onto the bed while Orantheio stayed at Khaly’s feet.

“I suspect it’s because someone at your father’s work reported him missing,” she said, pointing to Orantheio and taking a seat in the desk chair.

“But why would the Guild come to our house for that? And for that matter, why the Guild at all?”

Hettie quirked an eyebrow. “What makes you think they were from the Guild?”

“Oh, uh, Jahallah said the men who came to her house were wearing cloaks with the same symbol on them.” Khaly sat on the bed. Orantheio followed close behind, but remained on the floor. “Oh my gods!” Khaly exclaimed. “They took Jahallah’s mother!”

“When?” Hettie’s voice was urgent.

“A couple days ago. Jahallah said she showed her friend her Elemental, then Sumora showed up at school, and a day later her mother was taken.”

“How did I not know this?” Hettie’s whisper was so low Khaly barely heard her.

There was a creak in the hallway, making the four of them jump. Hettie slowly

moved to the door, peeking outside before straightening up.

“Edwin! Announce yourself next time. We have things to discuss.”

He rushed into the room, his finger to his lips, hushing both of them. Khaly could see the fear in his eyes, which slowly passed to her mother’s. He looked about Khaly’s room, at all her electronic scraps, and hurriedly threw a small device together. He turned it on and it sent out a wave of sound that caused the two dragons to yelp and the three humans to grab their ears. It lasted only a second, then Edwin started speaking rapidly.

“I think Arledge must have reported me to the board. I told him today I sent the dragon to be tested off–site, and he wasn’t happy about that. Then, the incident at school with you, Khaly. Someone is a spy. Not only at your school, but I believe Arledge is also. We are being watched closely and I’m certain listening devices have been placed around our house. We can’t talk long. This device will only last a few more minutes. Anything longer would alarm them since they can’t hear anything from us right now.”

“Edwin, they took Lisima Allmond.”

“Dear gods.” He brought his fingers to his lips. “How did they find her?”

“Darla is a spy,” Khaly said.

“Darla who?”

“Darla Chanista. Jahallah said she showed Darla her Elemental.”

“That stupid girl. The Chanista’s are known spies.” Edwin ground his teeth. “The man Orantheio set on fire is her uncle.” He eyed his tiny device, which was starting to smoke. “We cannot speak of any of this in this house. You must finish Orantheio quickly. Did I get you enough material?”

“I think so.”

“We must all go about our day as if nothing has changed. Make sure Bancroft and Jahallah understand that.”

Khaly nodded in understanding. “I have to build another dragon.”

“What? Why?”

“We need to hand in something for the school project. If we are to go about as usual, then I have to.”

He nodded.

Hettie began to say something.

“Don’t worry, I won’t name it.” Both mother and daughter shared a small smile.

“I can’t believe all this is happening,” her father said, dropping to the bed. Sumora immediately moved to sit next to him and they shared a look, but never touched. “Why does she do that?” He tried not to settle his eyes on her for too long.

“I don’t know. She does it to Bancroft, too.” Khaly shrugged.

“Okay. You start working on a new dragon, Khaly. Edwin, you will continue to go to work, and I will make preparations here, getting some supplies together then contacting the Underground.”

“How are you going to do that if the house is being watched?” Edwin asked. Khaly appreciated his attempt at remaining calm. She was certain it was on her behalf.

“I’ve been at this a lot longer than you, dear. I know how to get around the Guild. Now, don’t you worry.”

“I’m scared,” Khaly whispered.

“Now is not the time to fall apart, dear. We must stay strong, be diligent, and, when the time is right, disappear.”

There was a pop followed by a snap, and a small puff of smoke came from Edwin’s device. They were under full surveillance now.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KHALY RAN THE QUICKEST WAY home she possibly could; through the small forest outlining the children's playground behind her house. The morning's events sped through her mind.

She wasn't yet able to process it completely: The Guild was at her school, apprehending teachers and students. She had spotted Jahallah behind one of the stations in the mechanics lab, crouched down and out of sight. They locked eyes momentarily; Jahallah's face had lost all color, and her eyes were wide with terror. Khaly had been in the hall, hiding behind the corner. She knew she was only moments from being caught.

Khaly slid down the wall, peering around the corner. Two Guild soldiers stood at the end of the hall, blocking the front doors of the school.

Khaly knew she couldn't stay where she was much longer. She was in the open and they were bound to find her. She could either leave Jahallah behind, or find some way of getting her out of the classroom. Shouts and screams came from the opposite end of the hall. Closing her eyes, Khaly leaned back and suddenly understood the severity of the situation. Everything had become clear in the last week. Mr. Metayer pushed them harder each passing day, Darla seemed to now want to be friends with her and Bancroft, and Arledge no longer showed up at the lab.

Tension lay under the surface, like a bubble ready to pop. She needed to get home to her family. If the Guild was conducting raids at her school, her family was in danger as well. She had started to stand, ready to make a run for it when she caught movement in the corner of her eye. A scream broke out, and she turned her head. Two men in cloaks were dragging her software teacher out of a classroom by her hair. She continued to kick and scream while they dragged her into the hallway. For a moment she broke free and, stepping back, Khaly saw her bring her hands together as if holding a ball then bring them forward as if

throwing it. A blast of wind was released, tossing the men into the wall behind them and shattering the glass windows in doors.

Her teacher had started to run toward Khaly, their eyes meeting. “Run, Khaly!” she shouted. As the words flew from her mouth there was a loud, sickening suction. She was thrown forward and slid to a stop, inches from Khaly. There was a tear down her back; her spine had been ripped from her body.

Khaly’s eyes had widened in horror, and she looked at the men at the end of the hall. One held her teacher’s spine in his hand, a demented grin on his face. Khaly stared one last time into the woman’s dead eyes then, in an instant, turned and ran for the classroom Jahallah still occupied. As she passed through the door she slammed it shut and, in the same movement, snatched a stool and hurled it toward one of the windows. It shattered but did not break.

Jahallah stood, frantic. “They’re coming!”

“Help me!” Khaly had grabbed the teacher’s podium, thankful it wasn’t bolted down.

Jahallah rushed to her side. Grabbing the other end, they heaved it through the window. It was their saving grace they were on the ground floor.

“Quickly.” Khaly motioned for Jahallah to go first. As she was helping her through the window five Guild members burst through the door. Without hesitation or thought, Khaly had reached for the nearest object—a rod used to teach proper conductivity—and cast it at the men. It impaled the first, causing him to drop to his knees. Everyone froze as realization set in: Khaly hadn’t touched the rod. She had moved it with her mind.

“Spirit Elemental,” Jahallah said.

Khaly stared at her hands but Jahallah grabbed her wrist and yanked her through the window. “Come on!”

The girls had run for the far end of the Academy grounds, where a large gate at the end of the driveway was beginning to close.

“What the hell?”

“Come on. Now. We have to beat that gate!” Jahallah said. Khaly was on her heels, pushing herself forward.

The girls had barely made it through before the gate closed. They stopped, staring up at the school.

“Did they get Bancroft?” Khaly was out of breath, not from the run but from the terror building inside her.

“I don’t know.”

“Did he get your message?” Khaly watched as a group of men poured out of the school, starting off in their direction.

“I think so.”

“Okay. I have to go home.” Khaly turned to face Jahallah. “I will meet you and, hopefully, Bancroft.”

“Khaly, you can’t. If they’re here they’ll have already hit your house. Your parents have either been taken or killed.”

Khaly had already started jogging. “We don’t have time to argue. Go! It won’t take them long to catch us.” Jahallah had grabbed Khaly’s elbow. Glancing over Jahallah’s shoulder, she could see the men getting closer. “Jahallah, please, I have to go. At the very least, I have to get the dragons.” She had never fully admitted anything about the dragons to Jahallah, as she and Bancroft were still unsure if she could be trusted. Then she had seen the fear in Jahallah’s eyes and knew she had nothing to do with this raid.

“Go.” Jahallah released her arm. “We’ll meet up. Be careful. Stay in the shadows.”

The girls split into opposite directions. It was only minutes before Khaly could hear someone behind her. Dark clouds began to form, casting darkness down around them. Rain then poured down and water ran into her eyes, making her vision blur. She hit the grass of the small playground. She could see the far end, lined with thick trees, and Khaly lengthened her stride, spurring herself forward.

She could hear the men breathing behind her and prayed they didn’t pull her spine out like they did to her teacher. The grass was slick, but she was able to keep traction. It was mere minutes before she broke through the tree line, crashing through branches that slashed her face. She didn’t stop, but only slowed her pace due to the obstacles. Seconds later, she heard the men come through as well.

“Spread out!” one of them shouted.

Khaly was surprised to hear a woman’s voice. Jumping over a log she came down into a mud puddle. Her foot slipped out from under her, causing her to fall

on her face. She was about to stand when two of the men jumped over the same log, on either side. She was certain they saw her, but they kept moving forward. Khaly lay still, steadying her breath, making it shallower. She listened intently to the people.

“Well, she didn’t just disappear!” yelled the woman.

“She has the Spirit Elemental, she could be anywhere!” one of the men shouted back.

“That’s impossible. She’s from Nylm Hills, they’re Fire,” the woman said.

“We don’t have time for debate. Sweep the forest one last time. Make sure people are at her house. She’s not getting away,” another man finished. His voice was stronger somehow, eerie.

The voices faded as the small group walked away. Khaly knew she needed to move fast, and move now, but she couldn’t shake the feeling she was still not alone. It was a trap; they knew she was nearby. They only needed to wait for her to make her move. Urgency ran through her, and she knew staying here would only seal her fate. What if they hadn’t got to her family first and they were still there. She had to get the dragons out of the house, too.

Khaly gritted her teeth. “Man,” she breathed.

She slowly lifted herself a few inches off the ground, rolling over onto her back. She made no sound, and she couldn’t see anyone from her view point. Carefully rolling back over so she could leverage herself into a kneeling position, Khaly again listened intently. Using the log for cover, she peered over to the far end where she originally broke through the trees. Three people stood there. Looking back the other way she saw no one.

That doesn’t mean they’re not there, she thought.

She got onto the balls of her feet, staying crouched for as long as she could. Khaly then went for the opposite edge of the tree line. It would bring her into a neighbor’s backyard down the street, but it would be easier to hide among the buildings. She took her time, stopping often to look about. The last time she was only a few feet away from the neighbor’s backyard. The three men were now accompanied by five others and had begun their sweep. No more time to wait. Khaly stood to her full height, dashing for the yard.

“There she is,” a voice screamed.

Khaly weaved through the remaining trees. There was a bang and a tree exploded next to her head. Her heart raced but her breathing was even. As she exited the forest she came face to face with her neighbor, a woman who took it upon herself to know everyone's business. She was one of those who had complained about the noise. Over the last week, Khaly and her parents became certain she was a spy.

Covered head to toe in mud, she stood on the woman's lawn. The woman pursed her lips.

I'm dead.

"Go that way. Run through the Chamadar's koi pond to get the mud off your feet, then cross the street and back up to your house. There are people watching, so don't run through the front door."

"Why—"

"No time, just go!"

"My parents—"

"I'm sorry, Khaly." She looked over Khaly's shoulder; the men were getting closer. "Now, push me down and run!" she commanded.

"What?"

"Stop her!" A voice burst through their conversation and Khaly understood what the woman wanted.

"Thank you, and sorry." Khaly grabbed the woman by the shoulders, shoving her to the ground.

"Help me," she cried out just as Khaly jumped the fence. "Stop that brat!"

Khaly heard the men shout. "Outta the way, lady."

A smile crossed Khaly's face as she ran through the koi pond. *The woman was trying to help*. "I hope."

The men were coming over the fence as she jumped out of the pond. She saw only two, and knew they were going to try to cut her off. Diving through the neighbor's front hedges, she prayed their house was unlocked. Going to the side door, she tried the knob. It turned and she quietly opened the door, stepping in and closing it softly. There was movement in the front room; low, muffled voices. Khaly crouched down, looking about.

Man, I may have just effectively trapped myself.

She spotted another door to her right and skirted along the wall, careful not to touch too much or leave a huge mud trail. She opened it to find a laundry room, with clothes hanging to dry. She stepped in and eased the door closed, making sure it made no noise. Several pairs of pants and shirts were hung and, without thinking, she stripped down and grabbed the clean, dry clothes from the hangers. The only pants that fit were multicolored, with diamond shapes. She also had to wear a lime green shirt. She looked down at herself.

I look like a clown.

The voices grew louder and the knob to the room began to turn. Khaly panicked, looking for somewhere to go. There was nowhere. The room was a closet, really, with no other doors or windows.

"I'm telling you, sir, we would not hide any members of the Underground." As Khaly and the homeowner's eyes met, sheer panic rose in her gut. She gave a silent plea and he reached up, grabbing a bar hung with clothes. Khaly could see him take in a deep breath as he dislodged the bar from the wall, causing the clothes to pile down on top of her. She could no longer see, and prayed that she couldn't be seen. "Ah well, would you look at that? Dear, the dang rod fell down again. Now see, I'm not hiding anything in here."

There was a long pause, and Khaly didn't know if she should burst from the pile of clothes or wait. She heard a click and the voices became muffled once again. Khaly waited another minute before pulling off the clothes and climbing out. She pressed her ear up to the door. She couldn't hear anything, and was still not sure if it was safe, but she decided she had no choice.

Just as she was about to grab the knob it turned and the door flew open. A hand reached in and snatched her arm, pulling her from the laundry closet.

"Are you mad? What are you thinking, coming back here?" He pulled her down the hallway and into the kitchen. "There are Guild soldiers everywhere!"

"Lassadar, we have to get her out of here. If the soldiers come back it will be our lives! I'm not dying for any Elemental!" His wife's voice was shrill.

"Calm yourself, Ilastla. Khaly, what are you doing here? I heard the Academy was cleansed."

"It-it was."

"Did anyone else get out?"

“No, I was the only one.” In a split second, she knew it was a bad idea to let them know about Jahallah. Lassadar may not say anything, but his wife was different. “My parents. I had to come for them.”

“You stupid child,” Ilastla said. “Your parents were cleansed this morning.”

Tears welled in Khaly’s eyes. She knew, but she didn’t want to believe. “I have to get something else.”

“Whatever it is, it better be worth it. If they catch you—”

“It’s worth it.”

“Take the back door and cross down the street, where the light is broken. Then make your way back up to your house.” His voice was soft, kind. She could see the concern in his eyes and the fear in his wife’s.

“Thank you for your kindness,” Khaly said, touching both their arms. Ilastla recoiled at the touch, but Lassadar placed his hand over hers.

“Go,” he urged.

Khaly stepped back outside and followed the edge of the house, making her way through several more yards before reaching the spot where several street lamps were burned out. She silently thanked the gods the community hadn’t changed them. The day was getting late and the sky was darkening, making it easier to cross. She remained in a low crouch, and ran across the street to the first house.

Staying low and going for the back yard, she avoided any lit windows. It took her twenty minutes to get to the house directly across from her own. Khaly knelt at the front corner, staying in the shadows. She could see people moving about the living room, too big to be her parents. She knew everyone was right when they said her parents were gone, but there was a small hope in her heart they were wrong. She looked toward her bedroom window, but the room was dark.

Khaly was trying to figure out how she was going to get into her bedroom and get the two dragons, when she remembered Bancroft’s route. She moved away from the neighbor’s house, looking up and down the street. The lamps burned bright, and everyone’s windows seemed to contain some kind of movement. She swore under her breath. Her house was under heavy guard, and there would be no way for her to cross the street without being seen.

“Hey, you! What are you doing out? There’s a curfew.”

Khaly froze.

“Get up.”

She slowly got to her feet. She had been so close.

“Turn around.”

She took a deep breath and slowly turned. The man wasn’t much bigger than she was, and she gave a nervous smile. Her mind was racing, trying to figure out what to do. She took note he looked as nervous as she was, and decided to exploit it. Khaly had seen the guys in her old school wrestle one another, so she decided to try one of the moves they had used. She only hoped she had the skill to beat him.

Khaly grabbed the front of his cloak, stepped into him, grabbed his wrists, and tried to flip him over her shoulder. She staggered slightly, not quite getting him over her hip. They both stumbled to the ground in a pile.

“What the hell?” he mumbled from on top of her.

Now panicking, thinking she may have caused too much of a commotion, she flailed in attempt to get out from under him. She shoved her arm back with more force than she knew she had, elbowing him in the temple and knocking him out instantly.

Khaly rolled him completely off her and got to her feet. She brushed off the dirt and looked down at the small heap.

“Well, that was easy.” She shrugged, then smiled as she got the perfect idea of how to cross the street.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KHALY PUSHED THE WINDOW UP and eased her foot down, careful to miss the spots that creaked so as not to alarm the Guild soldiers downstairs. The room was dark, but it wasn't a problem.

"Sumora? Orantheio?" she whispered. She prayed they hadn't been found, then a quiet clicking sound came from the floor in front of her. She laid down, flat on her stomach, and saw glossy blue eyes looking back at her from under the bed. From the corner, another set of eyes appeared. Red with black flecks, they took Khaly's breath away.

The scales she added to his face that morning had all but fused, causing his robotic, mechanical eyes to come to life.

"Come on, we have to get out of here," she whispered, holding her hands out.

Slowly, they crawled their way out. Khaly cringed with each step Orantheio took. He was not light on his feet, nor stealthy in any way. His design, with the fire-starting kit, made his frame much wider than Sumora's. He required heavier gears to handle the weight, and saying he was big boned would not be wrong. Yet it appeared they both made a conscious effort to stay quiet.

Once Sumora was free of the bed, she scurried to Khaly's desk and tugged on a bag beneath it.

"Leave it!" She looked at Orantheio, who was almost close enough to touch, but Sumora was insistent on having the bag and was starting to make unwanted noises.

Khaly got to her knees, leaned over, and grabbed the bag. It was a large, heavy backpack. She hadn't packed it, and didn't have enough light to check who had, but she decided to trust Sumora. Orantheio was finally at her side. Now her eyes had adjusted to the dim light seeping through the window, she noticed he was still missing several scales. She remembered putting the materials with the nanites before she left for school. Groping for them on her desk, she was

relieved to discover they were finished. She grabbed them, then quickly realized her new clothes had no pockets so she turned to the pack and jammed them into the first pocket she found. She grabbed the two nanite robots and the control board, shoving them into the pack as well.

Taking off the cloak she stole, Khaly threw the pack over her shoulders then put the cloak back on. Just as she became aware of how much time had passed since her struggle with the soldier, she heard shouts coming from the street below. The commotion in the house picked up, and she heard many feet running up the stairs.

She ran for the window. “Come on, Sumora. Let’s go.” Sumora bounded to her, jumping onto the ledge of the window then down to the small porch roof below. “Light her up, Orantheio,” she said as the door knob started to turn.

The little dragon wasted no time, spitting fire in every direction. The room was ablaze before Khaly got one leg out the window.

“All right, let’s go.”

He bounded for her, this time sounding like a stampede of elephants. The door flung open as he passed. In one smooth motion, Orantheio turned his head, spit a fireball, and lit the first man’s legs on fire. But there was something different about this flame; it was blue and intense, and had ignited the material instantly. Khaly could feel the heat from across the room.

Orantheio landed, ungracefully, in Khaly’s arms, and she pulled the rest of her body through the window. Without a word, but not before perching Orantheio on the top of the backpack, she started down the side of the house. His weight was daunting and strained her neck, but his unfinished wings left her no choice. No prompting needed, Sumora followed.

As she scaled down the house, she heard agonizing screams from the man Orantheio had set on fire. She stopped only briefly, a chill running down her spine. Khaly jumped the remaining three feet, making sure she bent her knees to take the extra weight on impact. She crouched up against the corner of the house, sucking herself in as much as possible, so if anyone were to look out her bedroom window she wouldn’t be seen. Sumora gently nudged her hand, letting her know she was there.

Khaly hesitated. She still had hope her parents were alive and were in the

house, being held by the Guild. She had to check; she couldn't leave them behind. From the sound of voices of more people closing in, they were sure to burst through the back door and around the corner at any moment—but she had to see. Staying low, she ran the length of the house and saw two figures sitting at the kitchen table. Her heart beat faster as she crept closer. Their backs were to the door, wrists bound behind their backs. They were her parents.

Khaly reached up to pull open the sliding glass door when Sumora grabbed her cloak, tugging. Khaly ignored her, shoving her away, but Orantheio began his low growl. She reached up and pulled him off her back, putting him next to Sumora.

"Stay," she pointed and whispered. Taking one last look around, she opened the sliding door and stepped in. "Mother! Father! I'm here, but we don't have much—" Her mouth dropped open and tears blurred her sight as she stood in front of her parents bodies. Her mother's eyes were missing, and her throat was slashed. Her father was barely recognizable. They had badly beat him and his heart had been ripped from his chest, now sitting on the table in front of him.

Khaly froze, her feet wouldn't move. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. How could anyone do this? What kind of world did she live in? Why hadn't she been told of this other life? She wasn't prepared. She didn't know what to think or what to do. She trembled in agony, staring at her parents' mutilated bodies, not noticing the voices around her getting louder. A squawk cut through her thoughts, shaking her from one nightmare into another. Orantheio and Sumora stood outside the door, pleading with their eyes for her to come.

Snapped out of her trance, she bolted for the door. With no command, Sumora took to the trees behind her back yard. Orantheio waited until Khaly was free and spit hot blue flames into the kitchen, igniting the remains of her parents and the surrounding furniture. Khaly reached down, snatching him off the ground and giving chase to Sumora, and leaving her family, her home, and her old life behind.

It had been a long night, but the sun was starting to rise. It took Khaly and her dragons several hours to find their way back to the shack in the park; the meeting place she, Bancroft, and Jahallah had agreed to when the raids started.

The three of them had only a quick moment to talk at school before they were separated. Jahallah had given them both the code to the underground hideout, but the hallway was crowded and noisy. Khaly wasn't sure if Bancroft had got the message.

Opening the shed door, she slammed it behind her as she ran to where Jahallah had tapped the floor to get the screen to light up. With a small click the screen appeared.

Khaly tried to calm her mind and remember the code. It was given in such a hurry she wasn't sure if she had got all the numbers. Her first two tries were unsuccessful and she rocked back on her heels, Orantheio jumping down from her back. She sighed, unconsciously, in relief from the burden. She heard Sumora click, and Khaly looked about the small room to find Sumora perched on the window ledge, looking out.

"Someone coming?" she asked.

Sumora jumped down and ran to her, as if urging her to put in a code. Hastily, Khaly tried another number; this one worked and the hatch opened. She shooed Sumora down the dark stairs then looked to Orantheio, who had taken two steps back.

"You've got to be kidding. You basically blew up my house, but you won't go down some dark stairs?" He looked back at her, and she could swear she saw fear. "We have got to go, Orantheio. I will protect you. Please, trust me." She stepped down onto the first step, slowly lowering the hatch. "Come on!" she urged. The voices outside were getting closer, and the sun was rising higher in the sky. The small shack was lit up, there was nowhere to hide. In a last-ditch effort she reached out and snatched him by the front leg, dragging him into the passageway.

She lowered the hatch and heard a click, the lanterns lighting the staircase. She looked down at the dragon, who lay flat on her chest, chin down eyes blinking up at her.

"I should have named you chicken." She put her hand on his head, and he closed his eyes as Khaly dropped her head back on the stair above. A second later, she felt a bump on her temple. Opening her eyes she saw Sumora sitting next to her. "We should get moving. Hopefully Bancroft and Jahallah are down

there.” Khaly pushed herself up into an awkward seated position, still holding Orantheio.

The last time she had come down here, Jahallah hadn’t closed the hatch until they were further down, so Khaly couldn’t stand, only scoot down on her bottom for a few steps. Once far enough inside, she stood up and, as she did, heard a noise from above. Footsteps? Voices? Her gut wrenched in terror. Dragging Orantheio into the hole may have left scratch marks. Her only choice was to keep going down. Using the wall for support with one hand, and holding Orantheio in the other, Sumora bounded down behind. As she hit the bottom step she heard more noises from above, then saw a light in front of her.

Khaly started running. She was only paces away from the opening when Bancroft stepped into view.

“Khaly!” he shouted, a grin forming but lasting only a second.

“I think I led them here,” she shouted back. “I think they’re coming!”

Jahallah stepped out in front and, with no question, no hesitation, and no warning, she closed her eyes and raised her hands toward Khaly. There was a loud crunching noise from behind. Khaly looked back to see the ground grow and start to swallow the passageway.

“Run, Khaly,” Bancroft yelled.

She could hear clicking behind her. Khaly turned back to see that Sumora’s small legs were unable to keep up, and there was no room to expand her wings. Khaly spun around, running back for her dragon.

“What are you doing? Run, Khaly,” Bancroft’s voice was frantic.

Khaly reached for Sumora, but she jumped and latched onto her cloak then scurried her way onto Khaly’s back. Khaly turned once again, pushing herself forward and forcing her legs to move faster. There was only ten more feet, but it may as well have been a hundred. Just as her heel passed the threshold, the large earth barrier sealed the door. Jahallah collapsed into a chair, sweat pouring down her face. Khaly bent forward, supporting herself by placing her free hand on her knee, still gripping Orantheio.

He was trembling, and had buried his face into her neck and hair. Sumora did the same at Khaly’s back, placing her head on the back of Khaly’s neck. Bancroft walked up and placed a hand on her shoulder. She stood suddenly,

causing Sumora to click and latch onto her pack. Khaly fell into his arms, gripping him tight with one hand.

“We thought they got you,” he whispered.

“They nearly did.”

“What happened?” They pulled apart and Khaly placed Orantheio on the ground, encouraging Sumora to jump down as well. She removed her cloak and shrugged off her backpack, collapsing onto the couch across from Jahallah, who was still recovering.

She sighed in exhaustion, but recounted the story of what happened after she and Jahallah had separated. The two listened intently as Khaly relived the moments that had led her there. When she was done, the three sat in silence.

“I’m so sorry, Khaly.” Bancroft touched her arm. “You managed to pack a few things, at least.” He tried to sound cheerful.

“No. When I got into the room this was under my desk, already packed. Sumora was quite insistent I take it.” She grabbed the bag, pulling it toward her. Sumora and Orantheio, who had been sitting quietly, moved in closer. Khaly started to unhook the straps holding it shut. “I don’t even know what’s in here.”

Once Khaly had it open, Sumora nudged her nose into the bag. On top were some clothes, but it was what was on the bottom that had Sumora’s attention. “All right, settle down.” Khaly shoved her out of the way, pulling out the top layers of clothing. At the bottom she found tins and containers of food. Khaly pulled one out and opened it. The smell of fish filled the air.

“Fish,” Bancroft stated blandly.

Khaly lifted it to her nose. “Lobster, I think.” Sumora was stamping her feet and smacking her lips. Khaly smiled and put the container down for her to eat. “I’m getting the impression that lobster is her favorite food.” She smiled at Jahallah, who appeared entranced by the dragons but gave no indication she was going to respond. Orantheio was next. He sat patiently by the bag, looking into it and then back up to Khaly.

Khaly opened several other containers. Sandwiches, soup, dried fruit and vegetables, none seemed to interest him. The last container she opened had dry, salted crackers and Orantheio seemed to perk up.

“Crackers? Really?” Khaly placed the container down and he began to eat.

“We should split a sandwich and some vegetables. I don’t think we’re going anywhere anytime soon.” Khaly looked to the wall of dirt and stone that was once their exit. “I wasn’t positive they were following me.” She looked at Jahallah as she handed her a portion of the sandwich.

“I couldn’t wait to see. We couldn’t take that chance,” she said, reaching for the food.

“Yeah, but how are we going to get out now?” Khaly asked, her mouth full of food.

“She’ll just make a new exit,” Bancroft said for her.

“But I need to rest more before I do. I’ve never done anything of that magnitude before. I’m exhausted.”

Khaly nodded, shoving the remainder of her small portion into her mouth. She reached down, grabbing the containers from Sumora and Orantheio; she hissed and he growled.

“Hey! We only have so much food. If you eat it all now, you’ll starve.”

“Do you really think they understand you?” Jahallah asked.

“Yes. Yes, I do.” She started to shove the items back in the bag when she noticed a large lump at the bottom. Khaly furrowed her brow, glancing up at Bancroft, who just shrugged.

She reached in, pulling out a bundle and unwrapping it carefully. It was the dragon she had been working on for the past week. It was mostly finished, but not in working order.

“Why would you pack that?” Jahallah asked.

“I didn’t. My mother must have, but I have no idea why.”

“Maybe she wants you to finish it,” Bancroft said. “Maybe she had a vision you were to have another dragon.”

“She didn’t have visions, at least not that I’m aware of.” Khaly rewrapped the dragon pieces and started placing them back in the bag. She put the clothes in next, but when she picked them up a piece of paper fell out.

“What’s this?” Bancroft asked, picking it up. He opened it, but looked only briefly before handing it back to Khaly.

She took the note and began reading to herself. Tears formed anew, streaming down her face. Without prompting she said, “My mother wrote it. She packed

the bag for me shortly after I left for school. It says my father came home early. Someone had turned him in and the Guild was coming. They had no time to warn me or make preparations, so she packed this bag."

"Khaly…" Bancroft put his arm around her shoulders as new tears streaked her face.

"She's not the only one who's lost people," Jahallah said, standing up. Orantheio was about to spit fire, but Bancroft swiftly clamped his mouth shut with a hand.

"I never said I was," Khaly threw back.

"Then stop acting like it!"

"Okay, girls." Bancroft held his hands up, releasing Orantheio. "We all grieve in different ways. Let's just cut each other some slack. Besides, you didn't find your parents the way Khaly did. So, I think it stands to reason she can be a little hysterical right now."

Khaly slouched back into the couch, giving the dragons the opening to jump up. As she pet the two, Orantheio lay flat on her chest with his chin on her breastbone. She gently rubbed his head until he closed his eyes. Sumora bullied her way in between Bancroft and Khaly, placing her chin on Khaly's lap.

"Did you make it home, Bancroft?" Khaly asked softly, looking up at him.

"Yes. The house was trashed, but my family wasn't there. The entire neighborhood looked like a war zone and a ghost town at the same time. I'd like to think they got away."

"And you, Jahallah, was your dad there?"

She shook her head. "No, it was like Bancroft's. The place was destroyed, but it was empty."

"There were no patrols in your neighborhood?"

Bancroft and Jahallah shared a look. "There was no one to patrol," Bancroft said.

"We grabbed what we could carry and came here," Jahallah said. "We've been waiting for you."

"Thank you. I was worried you wouldn't be here because it took me so long." She fought back a yawn. The adrenaline from the previous day and night had gone, leaving her exhausted.

“We should all get some rest. After, Jahallah will create a new tunnel out and we’ll travel by night. Khaly, you probably need the most rest since you’ve been on the run since yesterday morning.”

“Where are we going to go?” Khaly asked through another yawn.

“We have to get out of the city. Leave the continent.”

“Leave the continent?” Jahallah seemed to come out of her trance. “We can’t leave.”

“Feesia is known for the strictest Guild regulations in the world. We have to get out and find the Underground. Aelborne is our best bet.”

“Aelborne?” The girls spoke in unison.

“Aelborne is a desert. You want to go to the desert?” Jahallah sat up.

“I don’t *want* to, but that’s where I heard the Underground was.”

“Can we talk about this later?” Khaly could barely keep her eyes open.

Bancroft pursed his lips, then stood up and grabbed Sumora. Her eyes blinked slowly open, as if foggy, and she didn’t react right away. Once she realized she was being moved away from Khaly she let out a howl, jarring both Orantheio and Khaly awake.

“What’s happened?” Khaly sat up, gripping the fire dragon and reaching for the water dragon.

“Nothing, I’m sorry.” Bancroft quickly dropped Sumora onto the couch. “I just thought you would be more comfortable lying down, so I was going to move Sumora and put your feet up.”

Khaly smiled, and a small laugh slipped through. “Oh, okay.” She readjusted herself, lying on her side and placing Orantheio in front of her. Sumora jumped up onto her hip. Khaly’s eyes were shut before anything else was said, and Bancroft took her cloak and draped it over her and her dragons.

He took the second chair next to Jahallah.

“We can’t leave Feesia,” she said. “There’s a war coming.”

“The war’s already here, Jahallah.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"We can't stay here. So start digging that tunnel or boring or whatever it is you do." Khaly was sitting at the small table, attaching the last of the scales to Orantheio's wing.

"I'm not going to the desert!" Jahallah screamed back.

"Okay, we won't go to the desert," Khaly said.

"We have to get out of Feesia," Bancroft said.

"Maybe this is where we're supposed to be, Bancroft," Khaly said. "You told me you saw me with a dragon on a green hill. Well, deductive reasoning—"

"A hill of green with a burning city below." Bancroft threw his hands in the air, walking to the opposite side of their small hideout. "Gods, Khaly. Don't you see? We'll die just like everyone else."

"The massacre at our school may be the only one," Jahallah said. "We don't know if this is global."

"Then all the more reason to get out of here," he said.

"We will, Bancroft." Khaly stood, now finished with the dragon, and walked over to him. She took his hands in hers. "You're scared."

He scoffed at her words.

"We're all scared, but we have a duty to seek out others like us." He made to say something, but Khaly raised her hand. "Running to the desert is not the answer. You have family that may still be here, and so does Jahallah. If they got away then they may have retreated to a different hiding spot. There has to be more than one. We'll get out of the city, but we need to stay in Feesia and find others like us. We have to prevent more massacres from happening."

"How?" His voice shook. "I'm not a fighter. My Elemental is passive, at best. How am I going to protect *myself*? She has her earth manipulation, you have your dragons, but what about me? I have nothing, Khaly." He dropped his chin.

"Is that what this is about?" Jahallah was almost laughing. "Gods, both your

families did you a disservice. You're an Air Elemental, so use those powers and harness the air around you."

"I've tried!"

"Obviously, not hard enough," she said.

"Really, Jahallah? Is that necessary?" Khaly was exasperated. They had already been in this hole for five days, and their food was all but gone. They were starting to get restless and were getting on each other's nerves. "Just dig the damn hole. *We* have the dragons, Bancroft. I promise that you will be protected."

Jahallah opened and shut her mouth, and Khaly was relieved she didn't say anything else.

"Look, I'm getting really tired of cat sanitation." Khaly's attempt at humor went unnoticed. "Okay, we'll stay in the city for a little while. Try to get some information. If there are any Underground members in the area, we can find them easier. If, after a couple weeks, we haven't found anything, then we'll leave Feesia." She looked at both of them, but neither spoke. "Bottom line, we're going to starve to death down here. So *dig*."

After a brief stand-off between the two girls, Jahallah finally gave in. "Fine."

Khaly turned to Bancroft. "I saw one of the teachers use this air thing. All you have to do is practice. When we get out of here and there is room to do so, you'll practice." She put her hand on his shoulder. "Okay?"

"Okay." His voice was barely audible over the sound of dirt being displaced and moved.

The two sat on the couch and watched as Jahallah worked at creating their new exit.

It was several hours before Jahallah gave any indication of stopping. As she created it, she slowly made her way down the long tunnel. The noise that had almost been deafening was now bearable, but when it stopped Khaly and Bancroft got off the couch to check on her.

"You all right down there?" Khaly hollered.

"Fine," a weak voice returned.

"I'll go—" As Bancroft stepped into the tunnel Jahallah appeared. He rushed to grab her so she didn't fall to the ground. Khaly gave her the last bit of the

water as Bancroft laid her on the couch. Khaly handed him the canteen and he helped Jahallah take a drink.

“How much further, you think?” Khaly asked, concerned now they were out of water.

“I’m finished,” she sighed. “There is a big tree at the end of the tunnel. The steps are crude, and it’s more of a ladder, but I made the base of the tree big enough to conceal us as we climb out.”

“Then we should move soon. How long—”

“It’s about mid-afternoon. We need to wait until nightfall before leaving.”

“Well then,” Bancroft said. “We’ll pack everything up, take a quick nap, and by the time we’re ready to go it should be dark enough.” Bancroft’s face didn’t show the confidence he tried to portray.

“That sounds like a good plan. Now it’s quieter it should be easy to rest. Jahallah—” Khaly turned to her, but she was already passed out.

“I’ll take that corner over there.” Bancroft pointed to the corner opposite the tunnel. “If you put these chairs together it makes an adequate bed. Not overly comfortable, but better than the ground.”

“Nah, you take the chairs, I have these guys.” She pointed to the dragons, who were checking out the tunnel. “They’ll end up lying on me in some fashion. It won’t even be remotely comfortable.”

Khaly grabbed her pack and the cloak, from which she had ripped the Guild symbol off. She laid down, using the pack as a pillow and wrapping the cloak around herself. Bancroft decided to use the chairs and pushed them together. Sumora and Orantheio wasted no time in curling up with Khaly; she lifted the cloak and both dragons crawled underneath.

Khaly passed Orantheio up to Bancroft, but he hesitated.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“He’s not going to set me on fire, is he?”

“No, of course not. Well, I don’t think so.”

“That is not comforting, Khaly.”

“Man. Just grab him, he’s heavy.” There was a small squawk from the dragon. “Well, dang it, you are. Come on, Bancroft, take him.”

Wary, he reached down and grasped his front leg, heaving him up. Bancroft was surprised at the weight of the creature. Then he reached down and helped Khaly into the base of the tree. She looked about. It was dusk, so there was still some light coming into the opening.

“We’re inside the tree?” She was awestruck.

“Yes, that’s what I said. I grew the base of the tree. Gods, you need to listen.”

Khaly pursed her lips. The nap had given Jahallah enough rest to return to her old, pleasant self.

“Don’t start, you two.” Bancroft sighed.

The cold air wafted through the branches and leaves that camouflaged the opening. Khaly wrapped the cloak tight around herself, shivering.

“Okay, let’s go.” Cautious, she poked her head out of the branches. She kept low and looked around, unable to see or hear anyone nearby. They were at the bottom of a hill, the sky lit red and orange. She crawled the rest of the way out, standing and walking up the hill, not waiting for the others. Sumora and Orantheio followed close behind.

It was a moment later before the other two appeared at her side. They gaped at the sight.

Bancroft gasped. “Oh, dear gods.”

Jahallah took in a sharp breath.

The image from Bancroft’s vision: her on a hill, Sumora on her shoulder, Orantheio by her feet, and the destruction of the city spread out below them, buildings ablaze. Their worst nightmare, Bancroft’s dream, had come to fruition.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Khaly skirted the edge of the building. The city was in ruins, but people ran from building to building, going about their business as if nothing had happened. Orantheio was at her feet but Sumora took to a higher perch, acting as her lookout. Khaly, Jahallah, and Bancroft had decided to split up. She would take the dragons, and the other two would stick together and watch each other's backs. They needed information; they needed to know if any other Elementals survived, if Vlarlee had been the only city taken by the Guild.

It had been several weeks since they had left their hole in the ground, and they were getting desperate. They tried to return the next day to rest, but found it crawling with Guild soldiers. They guessed they had noticed the tree increase in size overnight.

Khaly lifted the hood of her cloak. Although she had removed the emblem of the Guild she now wished she hadn't. It would have been the perfect cover for their mission. Stepping out into the street, she made her way toward a building several others were scurrying into. She looked up at Sumora, but she was difficult to see as her shimmering blue body blended with the shadows. Khaly gave a slight nod, indicating for the dragon to follow her. In complete silence Sumora made her way down the building, landing gently on the ground across the street. She tucked in her wings and walked across; anyone who may see her would easily mistake her for a cat, at least that's what Khaly hoped.

The three made their way into the building. It appeared deserted, the inside in disarray. She was certain she had seen people enter this building. They had been watching it for several days, and Khaly was positive they would find friends here. Khaly lifted Orantheio onto her back. She was becoming accustomed to his weight, and he had learned to perch in such a way as to stay firmly in place but not hinder her movements. Sumora stayed several paces ahead, looking around

corners. They made their way up several flights of stairs, but couldn't find a soul.

Sumora turned into a doorway several feet ahead of Khaly, but Khaly didn't think much of it. Sumora always disappeared on her own, but always came back. If there were any issues she would make some sort of noise. Khaly started down the hall, heading to the door Sumora entered.

"Sumora, let's go. Nothing to see here," she said.

As Khaly rounded the corner, a squawk from Orantheio caused her to turn. As she did, she felt a blow to the side of her head, knocking her to the ground. She rolled in time to see a form bearing down on her, but she couldn't make it out. She tried to scramble away, but it came at her too quickly. Was it a man or a creature? It reached for her, throwing another strike, and spots flashed in front of Khaly's eyes. She held her hands out in front in a futile attempt to protect herself, but the next blow was to her ribs, knocking her to the side. She coughed and heaved, the pain through her abdomen was more than she could take.

Before she could even think of reacting, she felt someone grab her by the back of the neck and yank her off the ground, forcing her to stand. Her sight was blurred by the pain, but still she scanned the room looking for the dragons. She couldn't hear or see them. Another blow to her stomach caused her to double over, again heaving and unable to catch her breath.

"Hey, take it easy, would ya?" A voice came from somewhere behind her. "The boss won't be too happy if you rough her up so much she can't talk."

"Aw, come on, they're just love taps," the second one said and struck her once again, knocking Khaly into unconsciousness.

Jahallah walked through the large warehouse, looking through the empty boxes strewn about. The sun was about set and they were losing light quickly. The ceiling was high, and the tops of the walls were lined with windows. No lights had been installed in the building, since the warehouses only operated during daylight hours. When the raids started it looked as though the building had been completely abandoned, but at some point over the past month it had been looted of whatever products used to be shipped there.

"There's nothing in here, maybe I was wrong about this place." Bancroft's

voice echoed through the empty building as he stepped out of an office.

“How many abandoned warehouses are there in Vlarlee?”

“Now?”

“No, genius, two years from now.”

She could see Bancroft resisting the urge to come back with a retort. “I don’t know, fifty or so.”

“Fifty! I am not going to search through fifty warehouses because you dreamed about it.” She put her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

“I dreamed there was an Underground in one of these buildings. Not just this building.” He dropped the empty box he had picked up. The sun was almost gone, and their light going with it. “Maybe we should just catch up with Khaly, see if she’s had better luck.”

“That sounds a lot better than rummaging around these dirty warehouses. We should at least see if we can find some food and supplies instead. Along the way, we might find that—” There was a sound of a door slamming from somewhere near the front of the building.

Jahallah and Bancroft froze, unsure if it was the wind or if they had a visitor. The two rushed into the office from which Bancroft had emerged. There was a filing cabinet, an overturned desk, and papers tossed about the room. Diving behind the desk, they got as low as they could. Bancroft couldn’t get his breathing under control. Jahallah put her hand over his mouth and her index finger moved to her lips, shushing him. His eyes bulged, but he nodded his head.

Slowly removing her hand, she hesitated but then raised herself to look over the top of the desk. There were no longer any sounds or any indication anyone else occupied the warehouse.

“How long should we wait?” Bancroft whispered.

Jahallah looked down and shook her head. She started to stand and he grabbed her arm, his breathing once again increasing.

“Don’t leave me,” he pleaded.

She furrowed her brow. “Don’t be stupid! I’m just going to go check, unless you want to? Be my guest.” She watched as terror crossed his face. “I didn’t think so.” Staying low, she crept around the desk and hurried to the door, slowly coming to her full height. Her long brown hair, with flecks of green, hung loose

around her shoulders. Jahallah tucked it behind her ear before leaning over to look through the door. Still, there was no sound. Slowly creeping into the short hallway, she moved into the main part of the warehouse. The empty boxes Bancroft had examined looked like they'd been moved.

She squinted as she moved around the darkening room. "Did he move those?" she mumbled, easing further into the area. There came another sound ahead of her, and this time she had no doubt they weren't alone. She spun to grab Bancroft and get out of the building, but came into full contact with a large man.

Bouncing off him, she was knocked back a couple steps. Jahallah stood, pulling her shoulders back and sticking out her chin in defiance. The man looked down his nose at her. He stood at least a foot taller and his scowl frightened her, but she refused to show it. There was a loud bang and rustling from the office, and Jahallah knew right away that this man had friends and that they had found Bancroft. The sense of guilt rolled in her stomach. Bancroft had been unable to figure out his active Elemental of air manipulation. He was essentially unarmed, which made him extremely timid and terrified of this new world order.

Normally, Khaly would have Sumora stay near Bancroft to protect him if need be. Jahallah had promised to keep him safe since Khaly couldn't get Sumora to stay behind. The guilt wrenched at her as she watched him get dragged from the room in which she had told him to stay. The second man was no less hulking than the first. Both were well-fed, pale-skinned, and had bright red hair. It was a trait commonly seen in Nylm Hills. For their features to be so prominent, several generations of their families must have been from the same continent. Unlike Khaly, whose hair was more of a dark red with multicolored flecks.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" A man who could stand to eat a few more meals, and who stood an inch shorter than Jahallah, came into view. She noted he must have been the bait, the one who made the noises to pull them out of hiding. "Two spies creeping about?"

"We are no—" Jahallah was greeted with a slap across her face. It stung, bringing tears to her eyes.

"Don't lie!" He spat, the spittle dripping down her face.

Jahallah reached up, wiping it away. She scowled down at the man, then looked at the spit on her hand. She spit back. One of the men standing behind

Bancroft reached over and struck her in the chest, sending her flying back and slamming into a support pillar. Bancroft ran to her side, kneeling down next to her.

“Jahallah—” A fist slammed into his head, throwing him to the side.

The man picked up Jahallah by the front of her jacket. He heaved her up and off her feet, slamming her back into the pillar with no effort. Still dazed from the first strike, all she could do was grip the man’s tree-like wrist with both her hands.

Bancroft shook his head, trying to recover from his stupor. But he had little time before a second blow was administered, knocking him completely unconscious.

“Not much of a companion.” The little man chuckled.

Jahallah gritted her teeth.

“Put her down.” Without any real warning the man released her coat, causing her to drop a foot to the ground. It jarred her, and she had been unable to brace her knees for it. She sagged on the pillar before regaining her composure, only to be suddenly struck in the stomach. Doubling over, she coughed, trying to catch her breath.

“Were there not three of you?” he asked. “Where is the other one?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Jahallah gathered her strength and stood taller, towering over the man.

“Tie them up and let’s get out of here.” He turned on his heel and pushed passed the two hulking men. “Knock her out.”

This was only enough warning for Jahallah to brace herself before the fist of a tree slammed into her face, causing everything to go black.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Khaly stood in front of her captor. He was eating an apple, as casual as if they were old friends visiting. Only her hands were bound, and the bruises on her face made it difficult for her to see. She struggled to stand and breathe. It was possible her ribs were broken from the beatings she had endured over the course of several days.

"We are *not* spies," Khaly had repeated through gritted teeth, her jaw ached and could barely move.

"Then why were you following my people in the city? Searching the old warehouses? And your cloak; you may have torn off the Guild emblem, but it's still distinctly Guild."

"I already told you, I stole it off a soldier outside my house." She was tired and they had been keeping her up, not letting her rest. There was no confirmation whether or not Bancroft and Jahallah were safe. The only indication the dragons were alive were the noises coming from the other room.

"Sorry, kiddo, not buying it." He took another slice of the apple with a small but effective pocket knife.

There was a shout from the back room, and a large flame could be seen issuing from a door.

"Holy gods!" a voice screamed out.

"Looks like your dragons are causing some issues." Her captor pointed behind him with his knife.

"That's *hot* water!" came another shout.

"Seems that your men are slow to learn." Khaly smiled.

"Don't get smart, kiddo."

"They don't like strangers, and they aren't big on being threatened."

There was a loud, ear-piercing squawk, which made Khaly cringe.

The man looked back at her. "Well, looks like we have it under—"

“Put it out! Dear gods, put it out!” a distressed voice rang out.

“I guess not,” Khaly said.

There was a long moment when the two simply stared at each other.

“How do I know I can trust you?” he asked. “I’ve only ever heard of one other Dragon Elemental, and he started a war that killed millions.”

Khaly’s brow crinkled in confusion, but only for a brief moment. Neither Jahallah nor Bancroft had ever said anything about a sixth Elemental.

“Oh, what was that?” he asked, pointing his knife toward her.

“Just ram the stick in there,” a voice snarled.

There came a squawk, followed by a large flame shot from the other room, the heat of which could be felt by Khaly and her captor.

“If your men hurt them in any way—”

“You’ll what?” He stepped up to her, inches from her face.

“I will kill you.” Her voice was low, fierce.

He swallowed when another screech was heard; this time it was unmistakable, one of the dragons had been injured.

Nothing short of fury crossed Khaly’s face, and she lifted her hands. Panic crossed his face and he quickly threw up his own.

“Okay! Okay.” He took a breath, trying to compose himself.

“Tick-tock, Boss.” Khaly warned, feeling the fury rise within her.

“Nenys!” he hollered. “Nenys!”

“What?” Nenys came to the door.

“Stop what you’re doing.”

“What? Why?” He glanced at Khaly, his eyes widening as he turned back. “Stop!” he shouted. She couldn’t hear the remainder of what was said, but she didn’t lower her hands.

“We’ve stopped.” The boss looked at her, his hands raised in surrender. “We’ve stopped.”

“Now, let us go.”

“Maybe we got off on the wrong foot,” he said, obviously trying to regain control of the situation. “What’s your name?”

“What?” She was caught off guard by the question.

“Your name?” His smile was forced.

“You first.”

He hesitated. “Chaith.”

“Khaly.” She stuck her chin out.

“Khaly? Khaly Hamons? Edwin and Hettie’s daughter?” He looked her up and down.

“Yes.” Khaly’s voice was strong and defiant.

“Edwin was a good man, and it’s a shame what happened. Betrayed by his own people.” The man sat back on the table, one foot on the floor. His posture told her he was trying to reclaim his position of strength, but she now knew she held all the cards.

“That Arledge is a sack of shit.”

“Arledge! You think Arledge was the spy?” His laugh was deep and throaty. “Gods, no. The man was too stupid for that type of job. The Guild wouldn’t touch him with a ten-foot pole.” Another man approached and whispered in his ear. Chaith looked back at Khaly, giving her another up and down glance.

“If it wasn’t Arledge, then who?” she asked.

“His lab assistant; what was her name?” He was about to call over his shoulder for the answer.

“Chahara? That can’t be right, there’s no way. She was a good woman.”

“All an act, kiddo. That’s the problem with spies, they’re generally *really* good liars.”

“I’m no spy,” she stated once again.

“Hettie really didn’t teach you much of anything, did she?” He ignored her comment.

Khaly refused to speak.

“If you really are Hettie’s—”

“I am.”

“All right, then it looks like we’re on the same side.”

“Really? Then why am I tied up and my dragons being tortured?”

“A misunderstanding.” He shrugged.

“Pretty damn big misunderstanding. Don’t you think?”

“Well, in this day and age one can’t be too careful.” He watched her. “We had

heard rumors of three young spies traveling with mechanical dragons, searching for the Underground."

She glared at him. "That's the thing about rumors…"

"Yeah? What's that?"

"They're barely based on fact."

"Well, aside from the mechanical dragons and you being spies; I'd say that was fact."

"I'm tired of this." Khaly held out her hands. "Cut me free, let my friends and my dragons go, and we'll be on our way."

He took a deep breath, then stood up and looked down at her. Chaith was at least a head taller, with wide shoulders. His eyes were bright green, and his black hair was dusted with dirt. He also had several days' worth of facial hair but, by all standards, he was a good-looking man.

"If you knew my mother, then you know my friends and I could have been a great asset."

"Could have?"

"Do you honestly believe that after this we would want to stay with you?"

He studied her, looking into her eyes and refusing to break contact.

Finally, she quirked an eyebrow.

"No, I suppose not," he said as he slid the knife between her wrists, cutting the bindings. She rubbed her wrists and he made to grab her arm, but she smacked him across the face. "I guess I deserved that," he said, rubbing his chin.

"You deserve a hell of a lot more." Not waiting for an invitation she went into the other room.

The cage the dragons were in was small, not much bigger than a crate for a large dog. It sat on top of a metal table. Although the dragons were small they had nowhere to go to truly protect themselves, nor could they extend their wings.

Sumora was in front of Orantheio. She was in an obvious protection stance, and his wing drooped at an odd angle. Khaly rushed to the cage, turning to the men behind her.

"Key." She held out her hand, her voice like ice.

The three men looked nervously toward the one in charge. He gave a quick

curt nod. Nenys tossed the key to her, which she caught easily then turned to unlock the cage. Both the dragons watched over her shoulder.

Once the lock was opened, Sumora made her way out and jumped to the floor. Khaly reached in for Orantheio, and he limped slowly toward her. As she pulled him out, she took a better look at his wing. It seemed to have been pulled out of its socket.

She pulled him in close and he rested his chin on her shoulder, shuddering in her arms. Khaly's eyes flared as she brought her gaze to the men in the room. They took a step back, as if it would protect them from her fury.

"My friends." Her voice was cold as steel.

"Nenys, go get her friends," the boss said.

Nenys grabbed the man next to him and they scurried from the room. The boss pointed toward the room they had originally inhabited. Khaly assessed him.

"It's got seating in there," he said. She saw some emotion cross his face, but Khaly couldn't place it. Was it fear? Regret?

Looking briefly down at Sumora Khaly started for the other room, the water dragon staying extremely close. Walking to the far side, as she passed the only table she gripped the end and dragged it with her. Placing it lengthwise, and facing the door, she put her back to the wall and placed Orantheio on the table.

Sumora placed her feet on Khaly's leg. She was confused why she didn't jump up before realizing Sumora was too tired to do so on her own. Khaly reached down and picked her up under her front legs so her body dangled, giving Khaly the ability to check for injuries. Satisfied, she put Sumora down next to Orantheio.

"Look, if I knew you were Hettie's daughter—" he started.

Khaly's glare compelled him to silence. In that moment, Khaly saw him recognize he was no longer in charge.

It was another ten minutes of agonizing silence with her captor before Jahallah was shoved into the room.

"Back off, you piece of garbage," she said, spitting at him.

Her long brown hair was caked in mud and blood. Bruises colored her face on one side, and it appeared at one point her lip was bleeding. She had no jacket,

and her top and jeans were torn. Her hands were bound behind her back, which told Khaly that Jahallah had put up a fight using her Elemental.

Khaly came around the table, and when they locked eyes Khaly could see Jahallah blink back her tears. Khaly wrapped her arms around her, and Jahallah rested the side of her face on Khaly's shoulder.

"Cut her free," Khaly said to the man who brought her in. As the bindings were released, Jahallah grabbed Khaly and held tight. Her body shook and Khaly heard her sniff. "No crying," Khaly whispered in her ear. "Not yet. Not with them watching."

Jahallah stood and pulled away, wiping her face pulling her chin up. Khaly directed her to the other side of the room, and was about to return behind the table when Bancroft was brought in.

Bancroft had a cut on his cheek and a black eye. His nose looked like it was broken, he had a bruise along his jaw, and his hands were bound in front of him. He had his jacket, but it was torn, as were his jeans. They had taken only his boots.

"Heard the commotion," Bancroft said, his voice raspy. "Kids giving them a rough time?"

"Well, you know how they are," Khaly said.

The girls then rushed to him, enveloping him in a hug.

"Well, isn't this just so sweet?" Nenys said, who had brought Bancroft in.

Without warning, Khaly came at him, throwing a punch that landed on his nose. He stumbled back, holding his face. The other man started for her when the boss spoke.

"Stop! Leave us." The boss moved toward them, cutting Bancroft free. This time it was Bancroft who lashed out. His punch connected with their captor's ribs, causing him to double over. It also visibly hurt Bancroft. He sucked in air and wrapped his arms around his ribs. Returning to his original stance he gritted his teeth. Jahallah helped him over to a couch against the wall.

"I didn't know you were Hettie's daughter," he repeated, holding out a hand as Khaly started to advance.

"And this would have made a difference?" she yelled.

"Yes. Yes, it would have." He finally stood and looked Khaly in the eyes. "I

spoke with her several days before the cleansing began. She told me your name, told me what you looked like, and told me you may be with two companions."

Khaly kept her face unreadable.

"But that's *all* she told me." He shrugged. "We really haven't proven ourselves trustworthy."

"Khaly," Jahallah said. She was now standing by the table looking at Orantheio. "What have they done to him?"

"I think they dislocated his wing."

He let out a small squawk, as if in response to her comment.

"We need to work together," the boss continued.

"What?" Bancroft shouted from the couch, where Sumora had joined him. She sat next to him, protecting him, staring at him. "Are you insane? Do you really think any of us would want to work with you? You've kept us captive for three days, beaten all of us, injured our dragons, and starved us. And you think we'll trust you?"

"You have to believe me, Khaly." He was pleading. "We received reports there was a trio of spies working their way through the city, looking for the Underground. They told us you had dragons. I had no reason to believe it was you." The same emotion crossed his face as before, and Khaly was now certain it was regret.

"If you knew my mother and she told you all this, then how could you have not known who I was?"

"We went to your house after the cleansing, after the Guild soldiers started moving out of the neighborhoods. We found your house in ruins, burned completely to the ground. And we found their bodies, or at least what was left of them. I checked the school and only the teachers were left, dead and mutilated. We thought you had been taken. We looked for Jahallah as well, but she was gone too." He paused, sitting down in a chair. "If I had known you were a Dragon Elemental then I would have known it was you, but she never told me that you were."

"Dragon Elemental?" Jahallah and Bancroft spoke in unison.

Khaly looked at Bancroft. "Why didn't you tell me? You said I was Fire."

"I'm sorry, I've only heard of one Dragon Elemental before. He lived

centuries ago."

"He started the Sage Wars," Jahallah finished. "No others have ever been found. It's said he spoke to the dragons, was somehow a part of them."

"There are stories he is responsible for the dragon population, and that he created the dragon language," Bancroft added.

"And you never thought to tell me this?"

"Your own mother didn't tell you, Khaly," Jahallah said. "What would make you think we would have any idea you didn't know?"

The room was silent until Nenys returned. "Chaith, you want this?" He held up Khaly's pack.

"Just put it there." He pointed to the couch where Bancroft sat. Sumora grew in size, hissing at his approach. Nenys quickly dropped the bag and was about to run from the room when Chaith called out an order.

"Bring them some food and water, as well as some medical supplies."

He gave a nod. Khaly noticed it was a highly reluctant nod.

"They have an excellent sense of smell. You attempt to alter our food in any way, I will kill you with my own hands," Khaly said.

When he cleared the room, Chaith turned to Khaly. "You're building another dragon." He wasn't asking.

She squinted at him. "You went through my bag." She didn't ask either.

"Sorry, precautions. You intend to make it real as well?"

"Don't answer that," Bancroft said.

"I think he already knows the answer, genius," Jahallah said.

He smiled. "I could say something, but I'm too tired to banter and I'm just elated to know you're all right."

"Shut up." Jahallah turned away from him and he smiled wider.

"My friends and I require clean clothes and a place to wash ourselves."

Nenys returned with their food. It wasn't much, but it was more than any of them had seen in days. Chaith relayed the new request to his men.

"Are there any salt crackers in there?" Jahallah asked, gently stroking Orantheio's head and trying to sooth him.

The boss laughed. "Seriously, it eats salt crackers?"

"*He* can get terrible heartburn." She shrugged. "Now, if you could give us

some privacy, please.”

“Get the hell out!” Bancroft shouted from the couch.

The boss nodded, pursing his lips as he closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Khaly turned to Bancroft, who got up to sit next to her. She lifted her hand to his chin, turning his face back and forth. “You good?” she half whispered.

“Smashing.”

“Jahallah, did they do anything other than—”

“I’m okay, Khaly.” Her voice cracked.

Orantheio was still on the table, and Bancroft did his best to heave Sumora up as well. Sumora quickly sniffed over the food, sitting back once satisfied nothing was tampered with. Khaly grabbed the medical kit and walked over to Orantheio, running her fingers along the joint of the wing where it connected to his shoulder blade.

She pursed her lips. “This is really going to hurt,” she said to him. “Please don’t burn me.” She knew if he spat fire it wouldn’t be because he wanted to hurt her, but she hoped, with her asking, he would refrain from doing it. “Jahallah, can you help me?”

She stood up and walked to the opposite side of Khaly.

“Hold him under the wing, just above his leg.”

Jahallah reached around, bracing him as instructed.

Khaly gripped the long bone extending from the ball joint of the wing to the shoulder blade. Using both hands she held him as best she could, preparing to extend his wing. He was looking up at her, and she could see the fear and pain in his eyes. Not only was the injury hurting him, their manipulations were doing so too.

“You need to go straight out, Khaly,” Bancroft said from the sidelines. “And do it really fast and hard. A quick jerk.” He made a motion with his hands.

Khaly nodded and met Jahallah’s eyes. “You ready?”

“Yup, go.”

“Okay, on three.” She and Jahallah inhaled at the same time. “One…” She

yanked his wing as hard and fast as she could. The little fire dragon let out a pain-filled, ear-piercing cry the like no one ever heard before. Khaly's ears popped, causing her eyes to water. Jahallah did her best to cover one ear by dropping her head to the side and using her shoulder to block it. Bancroft covered his ears with his hands, and Sumora tried to cover hers as well.

Khaly quickly released his wing, feeling around the joint. It appeared she had been able to pop it back into place. Orantheio tucked his wing in close to him as soon as Jahallah let go. Khaly dug in the medical bag and found a role of gauze. She wrapped it around the wing and under his body to ensure he couldn't move it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, leaning close to him. For the first time, he gave her a small head bump.

She sat next to Bancroft. Jahallah sat across from them and reached for a bag of crackers, splitting it open and placing it in front of Orantheio. At the same time, Bancroft grabbed the chicken and tore off a large breast piece before handing it to Sumora. She smacked her lips, stamped her front feet, and gladly took the offering.

"What do we do now?" Bancroft asked through a mouth full of food.

Khaly shook her head. She drifted deep into thought while watching Orantheio stare at the crackers.

"What's wrong with him? Why isn't he eating?" Jahallah asked.

"Maybe he wants chicken." Bancroft shrugged.

Khaly tore another chunk off the bird and offered it to him, which he took gladly.

"See, sometimes crackers just won't do." Bancroft smiled. "So, now what? Those rumors about an army have to be true."

"Why?" Jahallah turned to him. "Why do they have to be true? They're just rumors."

"Why would he lie about something like that?" Khaly asked.

"What? Now you trust him?" Jahallah said.

"I never said that. I'm just saying, we've all seen the city and we were in the school when they cleansed it. So why lie to us?"

"How do you know *they're* not the spies?"

“What do you want us to do, Jahallah? He said he knew my parents.”

“Do you believe him?” Bancroft asked.

Khaly stared at him for a moment. “I think I do.”

“Oh, come on. Three days. Three days they’ve been beating us, Khaly!” Jahallah threw her hands in the air.

“Yes, I know how long it’s been.” She pointed to her own bruises. “I wasn’t spared any beatings either. Nor have I slept.”

“We’re just running in circles,” Jahallah said, changing the subject. “Why should we be responsible for any of this? We should just stick to the original plan and get the hell out of Vlarlee.” Jahallah took a large swig from the canteen, and Khaly held out her hand for it when she was done. She took her own drink then poured some into a bowl for the dragons.

“I think we should join the fight,” Bancroft said, his voice cracking. This surprised Khaly; he had been the biggest advocate for not only getting out of Vlarlee, but Feesia as well.

“*We* should join the fight?” Jahallah scrunched her face. “*We*...” She gestured between her and Khaly. “Have been in this fight while you cower behind us.”

“Jahallah,” Khaly said, sighing. It was true. Out of all of them, Bancroft was the most afraid. He opted to stay hidden while the girls searched for food and shelter, but Khaly knew he was trying to learn his active Elemental.

“Gods, Khaly,” Jahallah whispered. “It’s been a month since this whole thing started, and he hasn’t given us any help. We should have ditched him long ago!” Jahallah glared at Bancroft. “If I hadn’t had to protect you, I would never have been caught in that warehouse.”

“Are you kidding me?” Khaly’s brow came together. “Do you hear yourself? Are you still so self-centered and self-important you would sacrifice one of us just to get yourself further ahead? This is war, Jahallah. The Guild already knows you’re an Elemental. Do you really think you’ll survive on your own out there? Bancroft is my friend. Something I could never, and apparently still can’t, say about you. If you want to leave then go, but I’m staying with him.” Khaly tore another piece from the chicken, separating it for the dragons.

“You think you’re the boss here?” Jahallah stood up. “That you can just order us around?”

“She can order me around.” Bancroft shrugged, his posture changing in a show of his confidence coming back.

“Shut up, Bancroft.” She spat. “If it wasn’t for you, I would never have been brought to this hellhole!”

“Hey!” Khaly shouted. “Nobody forced you to stay with us. You could have left whenever you wanted, but don’t you dare think I’m going to stand by and let you place blame where it doesn’t belong. We all have been careless, we all have had a hand in getting ourselves caught.”

“That’s bull, Khaly.” Jahallah pushed back. “If your damn dragon would have just went—”

Khaly suddenly stood. Jahallah flinched and took a step back. “You don’t seem to have a problem with them when they bring food to our camp and light a fire to cook. As long as you’re warm and your belly is full then we’re family to you?”

“You’re not my family,” she said with a sneer. “My family is gone. Dead.”

“Maybe you two should just sit and have a bit more to eat and drink.” Bancroft got to his feet. “Before either of you say something you may regret in the morning.”

“I’m tired of you telling me what to do,” Jahallah yelled, Bancroft’s pleas for peace going unnoticed. “You can’t push me around!”

Khaly placed her hands on the table, leaning toward Jahallah. “Then go.” Her words were slow and deliberate.

“Khaly,” Bancroft said, clearing his throat. “Khaly…” He placed his hand on her arm. “Khaly…”

“What!”

Bancroft pointed toward the door, at some point during their confrontation the boss, Nenys, and one other man they hadn’t seen before had entered the room. Khaly glanced over, standing up straight.

“Well, not the united front I thought you three would be after all.” Chaith smiled as they stepped further into the room.

“Are you going to let us go?” Jahallah asked. Her voice was no longer strong and confident.

“No,” he said, brushing past her and moving to stand in front of Khaly. “Not

yet. I think we could be of use to each other."

"How so?" Khaly eyed him.

"We could use extra boots on the ground," he said, smiling.

"You locked us up with no real clue as to who we were, beat up me and my friends—"

"Friend."

"What?"

"We beat one friend," he said, pointing to Bancroft. "This one over here is apparently not your friend."

"You beat my *friends*," she continued, "and tortured my dragons, and now you expect me to trust you enough to work with you?"

"She doesn't know who you are?" The newcomer spoke from the far wall.

Khaly gauged Chaith, standing in front of her, looking him up and down. "What makes you so special that I should know you?"

He laughed, but it seemed hollow. "I knew your parents."

"So, you've told me."

"I worked with your father for a short time in the Robotics Department, or at least a division of it." He took a seat in one of the chairs, a little closer to Orantheio than the dragon liked.

"Don't." Khaly pointed.

"Don't what?" Chaith asked. He turned his head and Orantheio was swallowing and smacking his lips. "Was he just—"

"Going to burn your face off? Yes. So…you're welcome." She feigned a curtsy.

"Uh, thanks." He swallowed, regaining his composure.

"I say we just kill the dragons and cook them up. They look like they have some good meat on their bones," Nenys said.

"What happened to your eyebrows, Nenys? They look a little singed." Khaly smiled.

"You little—" Chaith put up his hand to stop Nenys from attacking her, then continued.

"The day this one here disappeared," he said, thumbing toward Orantheio, "your dad came to me and voiced his concern that Arledge was a spy. I agreed to

do my best to check into him while your dad went to find the dragon. The next morning, when all hell broke loose, I didn't have time to tell him it wasn't Arledge, it was Chahara."

"How did you find that out?" Khaly took her seat; she was exhausted but didn't want to show it.

"I got it on good authority she and several other Guild soldiers were setting up a coup. She built some sort of army, but we have yet to figure out where it is. When the cleansing started, she disappeared from our radar."

"So, maybe she isn't a part of it like you thought. Maybe she just ran and hid like everyone else."

"Nah. Like I said, kiddo, I have it on real good authority." He looked at Bancroft for the briefest of moments before his attention fell back to Orantheio. "Got it all fixed up, did you?" he said, thumbing toward him.

Khaly chose not to respond.

"So, what do you want to do?" he asked, standing up. "Are you going to work with us or not?"

Khaly looked at Bancroft. He didn't say anything or make a move to respond, but she already knew he wanted to stay and fight. She had no idea if Jahallah was planning to leave or to stay, if there was a threat or not. They were all tired and scared. It didn't surprise Khaly Jahallah had lashed out, and she wanted to believe Jahallah didn't really mean what she said.

"You will give Jahallah supplies so when she leaves in the morning she can survive on her own. Bancroft and I would like a little more time to think about what we're going to do."

Jahallah's mouth opened then shut, tears welling in her eyes.

"Turning your friend out?" Chaith asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"No, she's decided she would like to be on her own. I'm merely ensuring she is able to do so."

"Your friend ain't going nowhere." Nenys commented from the back of the room.

An odd smile crossed Khaly's face as she shot out of her chair, and Chaith and his two companions flinched. "You have no say in this," she said to him before returning to the boss. "Neither do you. Jahallah will be allowed to leave and

you'll give her supplies. When we decide what we want to do, I'll let you know." Khaly leaned over, putting her hands on the table and looking up from beneath her brow. "Understand?" she whispered.

Chaith chewed the inside of his cheek, and Khaly could see he was doing his best to keep a strong exterior. But she knew she was in control, and she knew he knew. "I understand."

"We'd like some blankets and pillows, please. Something halfway decent to sleep on," she said, standing up straight.

"This ain't no hotel," Nenys said.

"Our supplies for comfort are limited. This is only a temporary base of operations," Chaith said.

"Then do your best," Khaly said, softening her tone and expression.

The boss stood and nodded to Nenys, who again gritted his teeth before storming off.

"I hope you will decide to stay," Chaith said, then addressed Jahallah. "We'll give you supplies, but I hope you change your mind and stay as well. This world is no place for anyone to be on their own."

"I think it was demonstrated we are of no match for the people who now rule in this world," Jahallah said. "And you want us to go out there and do what, exactly? We're safer just finding somewhere to hide, not to jump into the fight." She directed her last comment to Bancroft and Khaly.

"We would teach you, and you could learn to fight with weapons and hand to hand combat." Chaith faced her. "With your Elemental, coupled with physical fighting skills, you would be a great asset to the Underground." He was now addressing Khaly. "I've seen you all work together. You're best as a cohesive unit. You—"

Nenys returned with an arm full of blankets. He dropped them on the floor, two paces into the room, and left without a word.

"Think about it, all of you," Chaith said, signaling for the remaining man to leave the room. He then followed, closing the door once more.

Khaly went over to the blankets, finding enough for two each. "Bancroft, I think you're the worst out of all us, so you take the couch."

"That's bull, I've seen you holding your ribs too."

“See, always bossing us around,” Jahallah mumbled, snatching two blankets from Khaly’s hand.

“What now?” Khaly asked.

“You didn’t even consider me. Now I have to sleep on the cold, hard floor.”

“Oh, for gods’ sake!” Bancroft walked to the couch and yanked the cushions off, wincing with the movement. “Here.” He threw them to the floor, then took two blankets from Khaly. As he was about to lay them over the couch he paused, a smile crossing his face. “Khaly, help me,” he said, throwing the blankets in his hands to one side.

Khaly stepped up to him and looked down. “No way.” She couldn’t help but laugh.

Together they reached down and pulled, and the couch turned instantly into a bed. The mattress was thin, but looked to be in reasonable condition. It was big enough to hold all three of them if they lay on their sides. The two stood and smiled at each other. Khaly grabbed the blankets, which fit nicely on the bed. Bancroft turned to Jahallah as she was dragging her cushions to the other side of the room.

“There’s room for all of us,” he said.

“No thanks, I’d rather sleep here.”

“Jahallah, the temperature is dropping. It will be more comfortable for you to sleep with us,” Khaly said.

“I said, no thank you.” She dropped down onto the cushions, covering herself with one blanket as the other was covering the cushions to help keep them together.

Khaly sighed and Bancroft shrugged. “Nothing we can do,” he mouthed. Khaly pursed her lips and nodded.

As Bancroft crawled into bed, Khaly picked up Sumora and placed her at the end then returned for Orantheio. Both dragons looked as exhausted as she felt. She picked up the remaining two blankets, looking at Bancroft.

“Do you think we’ll need these?” She leaned in close, speaking in a low whisper.

“No, I don’t think so.”

She nodded and crossed the room to Jahallah, who was curled into a tight ball

to conserve heat. When Khaly draped the first blanket over her she jumped, but pretended to be asleep. Khaly laid the second one down.

“Good night, Jahallah.” She spoke loud, enough knowing she could be heard, but Jahallah did not respond.

Khaly returned to the bed, but not before turning off the light. She scooted under the covers, lying on her side, Sumora and Orantheio crawling under the blankets in front of her. She felt Bancroft cozy up next to her back; he was shivering and she knew heat was the only reason he spooned her. She could hear Jahallah from the other side start to snore lightly, then Bancroft’s breathing evened out and it wasn’t long before her own eyes drooped shut.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Nearly two months had passed. Jahallah decided to stay with Bancroft and Khaly, even though it meant they were going to fight alongside the boss and his group. Their camp was moved from the small, temporary location to a larger one.

Often, their small group was sent out on scouting missions. Khaly thought it had to do with mistrust on the boss's part, but he kept his word and trained them in physical combat.

Their latest mission was to gather intelligence about a location where the Guild was suspected of creating weapons. It was built into the side of a small mountain, known for spelunking. There was an opening hidden by rocks, but they knew what they were looking for so it didn't take long to find. When they reached the opening it was on a sheer cliff, about twenty stories down. Khaly looked over the edge, then up to the ceiling. The cavern was surprisingly well lit.

"The dragons won't have any issue getting down there."

"Right, but how are we?" Jahallah asked. There was nothing to hook their climbing equipment to.

Khaly dropped her pack and started pulling out her gear, the other two followed suit. She pulled out three silver objects about an inch thick and three inches long, with a spike on one end and a closed hook on the other.

"Here." She handed them one each. "The boss gave these to me. Just place the spike on the ground and push down. It will release the spike into the ground, then you can tie your rope to it." Khaly stepped several feet away from the edge, placed a spike in the ground, and pushed. There was a bang and dust flew up around her, but the anchor was secure. She made fast work of securing her line and attaching her descender, adjusting her harness, tying the end to her carabiner, and backing up to the edge. The other two followed her lead.

"I hope I tied the bowline correctly, and secured the anchor well enough."

Bancroft said as he set to lower himself down. He gripped the rope tight. “I had the hardest time with my knots during training.”

“You’ve been practicing your active Air Elemental,” Khaly said. “If you fall, just use your gift to cushion the landing.”

“Sure, in theory that works, but I really don’t want to test it.” As he lowered further down Khaly heard him say, “This can’t be right.”

“What’s wrong?” Khaly called down.

“I don’t know. Something just doesn’t feel right. The information we got was there was a bunker of some sort in this cavern, but so far I can’t see anything.”

“Can we talk about this on the ground?” Jahallah said. “Hanging on this rope is not as easy as it looks.”

“Did you put on your harness correctly?” Khaly asked, some concern in her voice. After the huge disagreement months prior, the tension between the two girls had only increased.

“Yes, it’s not that complicated,” she said.

“I was just asking.”

“Well don’t!”

Khaly decided to leave the conversation at that.

Bancroft lowered a few more feet before disengaging his cable clip and dropping to the ground. He looked about the small opening, keeping an eye out for anyone or anything. Less than a minute later, Sumora landed gently next to him, her wings spread.

She opted to fly where permitted, but kept as close to Bancroft as possible without losing visual contact of Khaly.

“Just jump, you bloody chicken,” Khaly said. Most of the time Orantheio stayed so close to Khaly she had to carry him. She kept her pack on so he had a sort of perch. As she landed next to Bancroft, Orantheio gripped her shoulder. She rolled her eyes at Bancroft when he smiled.

“He’s got to be one of the most dangerous creatures around, but scared of his own shadow,” Bancroft said as Jahallah dropped down next to Khaly.

“Lead the way, Vision Boy,” Jahallah said, waving her hands for them to keep moving.

“I *hate* that name.” He gritted his teeth as he led them down a corridor.

Khaly dropped Orantheio to the ground, and he followed close behind while Sumora stayed just ahead. She disappeared around a corner, but seconds later came back into view. It was a signal the area was clear.

The others entered the room, which was a fair size. The floor was made of metal and the walls rock.

“Huh,” Jahallah said, touching one of the walls.

“What?” Khaly asked.

“Looks like they have an Earth Elemental with them.” She pointed to the walls. “Someone, or several people, with that gift cleared this room.”

“Then why is it so rough looking?” Bancroft asked.

“Inexperience. Stronger Earth Elementals can smooth all this out with ease.”

“Like our hideout?”

“Yup. My dad and uncle created that place. They had been studying their gifts for years.”

There were a number of tables in the center of the room, set up like workstations. Scrapes of metal, gears, and signs of robotics had been left behind.

“This place has been empty for a while, look at the dust buildup.” Khaly ran her hand across a table top.

“How far ahead of us do you think they are?” Jahallah asked, looking over a motherboard that had been left behind.

“I’m telling you, this doesn’t seem right.” Bancroft looked nervously about.

“Was this not in your vision?” Khaly asked.

“No.”

“No?”

“Then what the hell are we doing here?” Jahallah asked, tossing away the motherboard.

“Because the boss told me it was Bancroft’s vision,” Khaly fought to keep her voice down and her temper in check.

“Why do you trust that guy? This isn’t the first time he’s done this to us,” Jahallah screamed, her voice echoing off the stone walls.

“I don’t know why I keep believing him, but I just feel like I need to trust him.”

“Then whose vision was it?” Bancroft asked, his attempt at quelling the fight

with a change in subject was not lost on Khaly.

Khaly stared at the floor. “Must have been Nenys’s. He’s the only other Air Elemental in the group.”

Jahallah threw her hands in the air. “Nenys’s visions are never right.”

“They are,” Bancroft said, “but he doesn’t see that far into the future, and he doesn’t always know how to figure out how far ahead his visions really are. I think we’re a few weeks behind Chahara and her people.”

“Well, let’s just look around and see if there’s anything left behind to give us a clue,” Khaly said, walking to the far end of the room.

“What’s the boss’s name?” Bancroft asked as they searched about. “Have you ever asked?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He said he feels his former name has no place in this new world. So he prefers to be called Boss.” Khaly shrugged, she didn’t buy into it either, but she really didn’t care.

“That’s lame,” Jahallah said, with a sneer. “So you don’t know his name then.”

“It’s Chaith,” Khaly said, then added in a whisper, “I think.” It appeared no one heard her though.

“There’s nothing here, Khaly.” Bancroft sighed.

“Except for this motherboard.” Jahallah waved it in the air.

Khaly moved to her, taking the piece of hardware. “I guess it’s worth taking back and testing. There might be something on this to give us a hint of what they’re up to.” Khaly shoved it into her pack.

“Why don’t you test it here?” Jahallah asked. “You carry all that stuff with you, and you never leave anything behind. You’ve even hauled that half-finished dragon around.”

“It would take too long to set up,” Bancroft said. “I really want to get out of here. It just doesn’t feel right.”

Khaly eyed him. As his active Elemental improved he gained more confidence, but his nervousness now concerned her. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” She waved.

They made their way to where they had left their climbing equipment. Khaly

began harnessing herself and getting her climbers ready. She turned to pick up Orantheio only to find he wasn't behind her. She looked about, finding neither dragon there.

"Man," she said, starting to unhook herself from her rope.

"What's wrong?" Bancroft asked.

"Do you notice anything missing?" She waved her hand, sweeping it about the room.

"Gods." Bancroft started unhooking himself as well.

"Why do you keep bringing those two?" Jahallah was exasperated. "At the very least, leave Orantheio at the base camp."

Sumora had a tendency to wander off, but always found her own way back and rarely wandered away for too long. When she did, she generally brought food back. But when Orantheio went with her, they had to go retrieve them. Not only was he scared of his own shadow, but he had a terrible sense of direction.

Khaly shot a look toward Jahallah. "Maybe I'll leave *you* at the base camp next time." Even though they had been working with the Underground, the three of them still didn't trust many of the rebels. They were offered separate living quarters, but opted to stay together. More than once, Nenys cornered Jahallah or Khaly, making advances and lewd comments. He also showed a discerning amount of interest in the dragons. Khaly didn't trust any of them, not even the boss, with her dragons.

"I was just saying, Khaly," Jahallah stammered. "It's not that I would actually leave them behind. It's just that I'm so freakin' tired!" She finished unhooking herself, tossing the rope aside.

"They have been running us more than the other scout teams, and the last three missions have been dead-ends like this," Bancroft said.

Khaly started back to the lab.

"I know you like him, Khaly," Jahallah said, following her down the corridor. "I just don't understand why you trust the guy. He's the one sending us on these wild goose chases."

"I don't know why either," Khaly called over her shoulder, not wanting to make eye contact. She felt responsible for their being in yet another empty lab. "But I can't believe he's doing this on purpose. Maybe Nenys is feeding—"

“They’ve been eyeing the kids for weeks, Khaly,” Bancroft added. “There is just something not right about this group. It’s only been getting worse.”

“You’re the one who wanted to stay and work with these guys, Bancroft.” Khaly turned on them. “I suggested a month ago that we should go, that there had to be another Underground group out there. Then we could gather more of our own intel. But *no*! You said you wanted to stay here. You said you wanted to work with these guys.”

“You’re right, I—”

There was a loud squawk from the room they were moving toward, and Khaly spun on her heel and bolted toward the call. The squawk came again. Angry? Hurt? She couldn’t tell. She heard the other two running behind her. They rounded the corner, entering the lab. Three large forms stood at the far end, and two men stood in front. One of the men had Sumora clamped under his arm, pinning her wings, the other hand gripping her mouth shut.

Khaly gritted her teeth and charged at the small group. As she got closer, she recognized the man advancing on Orantheio as he backed into a corner. Khaly couldn’t figure out why he wasn’t spitting fire.

“Nenys!” Bancroft shouted from her right. A sharp gust of wind swept past, slamming Nenys into the wall and allowing Orantheio to get free.

Khaly jumped to the top of one of the long tables and bounded across to the next, Jahallah on her left.

“Bring down the rocks,” Khaly screamed.

“I can’t without hurting Sumora,” she yelled back.

The man gripping her smiled and began to back into the shadows. As he spun away fear and fury rose in Khaly.

She swiped her hand through the air, causing one of the tables to come unbolted from the floor and crash into his back, knocking him to the ground. It was enough to free Sumora.

Bancroft reached Nenys, ramming his knee into the man’s gut and causing him to double over. Bancroft brought his knee up, connecting with Nenys’s nose. Nenys swung out as he straightened, catching Bancroft in the jaw and knocking him back. It only took a second for him to recover and take a flying kick at Nenys, this time knocking him fully to the ground.

The larger figures who had stood behind the men sprang to life. Khaly stopped dead in her tracks, several paces away. The figures seemed to be protecting the second man.

“Sumora, fly,” Khaly screamed, turning to Jahallah. “Bring it down!”

The instant the water dragon cleared the area Jahallah reached out, grabbing the rocks above with her mind and pulling them down. In the same instant, an explosion struck the wall behind Bancroft. He was tossed to the side, slamming into the table. The blow had come from one of the figures, but Khaly wasn’t sure if it was on purpose or if they had terrible aim.

Bancroft again recovered quickly, getting to his feet and grabbing Nenys by the collar, then dragging him further back into the room as rocks came down on the other man and his protectors.

Frantic, Khaly looked about for Orantheio. He had backed himself under one of the tables, clawing at his face. Khaly ran to him, and when he glimpsed her came toward her. She scooped him up, running to the farthest table to where Bancroft was headed. She noticed a binding around his muzzle as she sat the dragon down. Jahallah joined them, pulling a small dagger from her belt. Khaly gave her a quizzical look. None of them carried weapons of any kind.

“I told you I don’t trust these guys,” she said in response to the look.

“Hmm.” Khaly carefully took the blade, placing it between his muzzle and the binding and cutting him free. She cupped the dragons face in her hand. “Have you learned to stop running off?” Sumora landed lightly next to him, and Khaly did the same with her. “I know *you* haven’t learned.”

Sumora clicked.

“No talking back,” Khaly said.

“Where the hell did these guys come from?” Jahallah asked, wiping the sweat from her forehead and looking at the pile of rocks that buried Nenys’s partner and the three hulking creatures.

“There had to be another door back there. It would only make sense, as I doubt they repelled in every day to work.”

“I checked all through here. I didn’t see an opening.” Jahallah squinted into the darkness.

“Well, it must have been hidden but it’s of no use to us now.”

“What are we going to do with this traitor?” Bancroft pushed Nenys into the table, slamming his face down.

“I don’t understand,” Khaly said, coming into his line of sight. “Why? Why would you do this? We’re supposed to be on the same side. You’re an Elemental.”

“Am I?” He sneered.

Khaly looked to the other two, her brow furrowing.

“But the visions—” Bancroft started.

“Who says they were visions?” He let out a sickening laugh.

“It makes sense,” Jahallah said. “If he’s a spy, then they would give him information leading us in the wrong direction.”

“Why would I want to be on the losing side of this war?” He laughed again. “Don’t you get it? The Guild is stronger, faster, and has more men than the Underground could ever hope for. Why would I want to live in a hole when I can have the comforts of my home?”

“Is it just you? Or are there others?” Khaly asked. “Is the boss involved? Does he know?”

“It runs deeper than you could ever imagine.” He scoffed.

Khaly stepped out of his line of sight, looking to the other two. Her first thoughts were of going to the boss. She felt betrayed, she had thought she could trust the man. Her companions were as perplexed as she was.

“Maybe he’s working alone. If we take him with us and—” Bancroft started, but there was a crumbling sound from where Jahallah had brought the roof down on top of the others.

“If that’s the plan, then we better get going,” Jahallah said, backing up. Turning, she grabbed Sumora and started for the corridor. Khaly and Bancroft exchanged a quick glance, then Khaly grabbed Orantheio and Bancroft started to drag Nenys. Khaly rounded the corner after Jahallah, but as Bancroft followed there came another shattering bang. Nenys suddenly became extremely heavy, and his body fell to the ground.

“Run, you useless—” Bancroft growled as he turned to the man. “Dear gods.”

Khaly stopped at the end of the corridor, spotting Bancroft standing over Nenys’s lifeless body. She knew he had never seen a dead body like this before,

with a large hole in his chest; it had to be unnerving. There was another loud crack and the rocks above their head crumbled down, shaking him from his trance.

“Bancroft, come on,” Khaly screamed.

He staggered away from the body, not taking his eyes off it. An instant later, a large form tried to pass through the small door off the corridor. It struggled to get through the tiny passage, firing off another blast and narrowly missing Bancroft’s head.

“Run, Bancroft,” Khaly screamed. As he emerged she yelled to Jahallah, “Bring it all down! Like you did before.”

“If I do that the whole cavern will come down on us, too.”

“Can’t you grow it? Like the trees and dirt?”

“Yes, but it would take too much time.” There was another loud crack from the end of the corridor. Bancroft bolted out of the darkness, nearly slamming into Khaly.

“What are you doing? Let’s get out of here.” He started for his rope, but found it coiled into a pile on the ground and his eyes widened with horror.

“This was a trap.” Khaly was ashamed. She doomed them all.

“Send Sumora up there,” he said.

“And do what, exactly? She can’t pull us out.”

“No, but maybe she can anchor the ropes somehow.” His voice shook with the desperation he must have felt, because Khaly felt it too.

“If we hadn’t gone back for—” Jahallah started, looking down at the two dragons.

“Don’t even start. If we just kept going, they would have killed us up there instead of down here.” Khaly gritted her teeth.

There was another loud crack, but their pursuer didn’t seem to be getting any closer.

“What is it doing down there?” Jahallah asked.

“I don’t know. It’s pretty big, whatever it is. Maybe it can’t fit down the corridor,” Bancroft said.

“Why are we still talking about this? We need to get the hell out of here!” Jahallah was almost hysterical.

Khaly stepped back, looking at the cliff above them then at the surrounding walls. She was about to speak when Bancroft beat her to it.

“Jahallah,” he said, pointing to the wall behind her. “Grow hand and foot holds on that wall, so we can climb out of here.”

When Khaly turned to Bancroft there came another bang, but this time the shot grazed Jahallah’s arm. She grabbed it, staggering back. They ran to her, and it was if the skin had been seared; blood red in some spots and black in others, charred.

Jahallah gritted her teeth. Nothing was said. She stepped back, looking up at the wall closest to the cliff. Raising one hand, concentrating hard, she got to work. Khaly rushed to her rope, piled on the ground, and started to coil it up.

“What are you doing?” Bancroft asked.

“We may need these later.” She wrapped the end, securing it so it didn’t unravel without her help, and wore it like a sash. Bancroft followed her lead with his rope as she went to Jahallah’s and did the same.

Several more shots fired from the tunnel.

“I think it’s getting closer,” Bancroft said. He peeked around the corner and shouted. “It’s boring its way through!”

“Jahallah,” Khaly said, urging her to work faster.

“Almost there. Just a few more.” She was sweating from the exertion.

“Go, Bancroft,” Khaly instructed.

Without arguments or questions, he ran for the wall and began climbing, wearing his pack and the rope like a sash. Khaly looked at the dragons then drew her gaze up, knowing they would understand she needed them to fly. She couldn’t handle their weight on such a climb. Sumora watched as Bancroft ascended; he was making quick time. She looked back at Khaly, as if trying to decide who to stay with.

“Go,” Khaly said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

She clicked several times before extending her wings and flapping down hard to give her lift.

“Go.” Khaly commanded Orantheio.

He squawked in protest.

Another shot fired into the chamber as Jahallah yelled, “Done. Go!” She

picked up the rope at her feet and wore it like a sash as the others did.

“Go,” Khaly told her. “I’m right behind you.”

As Jahallah took her first few steps, Bancroft reached the top of the cliff and heaved himself over.

“Go, damn it, or we’re both going to die down here,” she screamed at the frightened dragon.

With one final squawk he extended his wings and flapped tentatively, getting lift.

Khaly ran for the wall, following Jahallah up. She could see her struggling; the energy it took for her to create the grips must have taken a great deal out of her. Khaly knew Jahallah had been practicing her active Elemental, but under this kind of pressure the exertion would be worse.

Khaly spotted Bancroft toss his rope down to Jahallah then, seconds later, start to haul her up. Khaly continued to climb as fast as she could. When she looked down she spotted the creature coming out of the tunnel.

“Man.” She was doing her best to pick up the pace when she felt a rope hit her in the head. She grabbed it, knotting it the best she could with one hand, while Bancroft and Jahallah helped pull her up. She reached the top and they each took an arm, dragging her over the edge. As her foot cleared the drop, a bang sounded and the large chunk of rock she had just previously been on crumbled.

Khaly scrambled to her feet and looked at Jahallah, all three heaving for breath. Without prompting, Jahallah reached out to the rocks above the cavern. Bancroft turned, running for the exit, Sumora already giving chase. Khaly snatched up Orantheio. They emerged from the cave as the sound of an avalanche came from within. Clouds of dust billowed from the mouth and Jahallah emerged, covering her mouth and coughing. Khaly grabbed her arm before she got too far, pulling her to the side and behind the large boulders outside the door. The sun had set. Visibility was zero and the temperature had dropped several degrees from when they entered hours before.

The three exchanged looks in the dark. They knew there was no way they could risk going back to camp, not knowing who else was a spy. They had to find their way out of Feesia.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

They crouched behind the rock, waiting for the dust to settle as they caught their breath. It didn't take long for their eyes to adjust to the dim moonlight, the only source of light they had. It started to drizzle as the three considered their options.

"Man."

"We can't return to the camp," Bancroft said.

"Thanks for the tip, genius," Jahallah said.

"We need to find someplace to set up a small camp," Khaly said, ignoring the snipe.

"Why don't we stay in the cave then? It's dry in there, we can have a fire—" Bancroft said.

"Because there's no way of knowing if that creature will climb its way out of there," Khaly said.

"Robot," Bancroft said.

"What?"

"It's a robot. When I was at the end of the hall with that…thing, I got a closer look. It's a huge robot man."

"That doesn't matter now. We need to get out of here. We should go east." Jahallah stood, holding the arm wounded by the robot's weapon. Khaly took off her pack, pulling out a medical kit. She grabbed some disinfectant and gauze and started cleaning the wound as best she could.

"Why east?" asked Khaly.

"I remember, years ago, my dad and uncle talking about the Underground, and one of the divisions was in the east."

"Where in the east? The east is pretty damn big."

"I should think it would be near a town or a city," she spat. "Gods, does your stupidity have no bounds?"

“Maybe we should just think about shelter tonight,” Bancroft said.

Khaly pursed her lips, wanting to say something back but knowing it would result in a much bigger fight. Instead, she finished wrapping Jahallah’s wound. When she was done she waved her hands, indicating Bancroft lead.

Bancroft opened and closed his mouth as if in protest. Khaly was relieved when he took point down the uneven terrain, away from the cave. He also tried to angle them away from the direction of base camp. Khaly and Jahallah followed directly behind while the dragons picked their way down above them, every so often taking flight and landing up ahead.

As they circled around the mountain they spotted a forest in the distance, and decided to make it their destination for the night.

It was an hour before they reached level ground and were able to make better time. Not wanting to stay out in the open for too long, they broke into an easy jog. Khaly was relieved when Orantheio decided to fly with Sumora, instead of insisting she carry him. She hoped yelling at him in the cavern hadn’t soured his feelings toward her; he was a good heat source on cold nights.

They remained silent, stopping every ten minutes or so to walk and catch their breath. Every so often Khaly would look behind them, trying to see if they were being pursued. She didn’t know if the robot would be able to fight its way out of the rubble from the mountain. She never checked to see how much Jahallah had brought down, nor was she certain Nenys didn’t have others waiting nearby. It had been a few hours since they had been ambushed, and people may have started to miss him and gone looking.

They approached the tree line and stopped. The moonlight didn’t penetrate the treetops, so no light got in. The dragons dropped down next to Khaly, Orantheio taking up his regular spot by her feet. She smiled inwardly, glad the dragon didn’t hold grudges.

“Who’s got the flashlight?” Bancroft asked.

“I have one,” Khaly said, taking off her pack to dig it out.

“Of course you do.” Jahallah crossed her arms.

“What’s your problem now?” Khaly rocked back on her heels, looking up at her.

“Girls, come on.” Bancroft was on the border of whining. “I’m tired, wet,

cold, and hungry. Can you just find the flashlight so we can set up a camp and get some rest?"

The girls blinked at him. He always broke up their fights, but usually it ended with a simple '*Stop it'*. Khaly returned to her search, producing a small light that fit into the palm of her hand.

"Are you kidding? That's going to help us see in there?" Jahallah pointed to the woods.

Khaly merely looked at her, pointed the light, and turned it on. It was bright as day.

"Wow," Bancroft said as Khaly took the lead.

Sumora clicked, and Khaly looked down. "Go on." She knew she was going to go and find food. With no other instruction, Sumora was gone. Orantheio watched as she departed, but stayed close to Khaly.

They walked for another twenty minutes before agreeing on a spot to set up camp. It wasn't a large clearing, but there were a lot of pine needles on the ground. The area would help support a lean-to, and the clearing was large enough that, if they started a fire, it wouldn't burn down the forest. They made quick work of setting everything up. Bancroft carried most of the camping gear, as their trek to the mountain had taken two days. He pulled out a tarp, cords, and tightly rolled bedding. Jahallah had the blankets. Khaly carried their cooking supplies: a pan, a small pot, and some utensils and bowls. They were all responsible for their own water supply and clothing.

Khaly started to gather wood and rocks to make a fire. When she returned she laid out the rocks in a circle, placing the wood inside in a tent formation. She looked at Orantheio, who was sitting across from her and watching intently. When she was finished she smiled and nodded to him; he stamped his front feet and spat a small blue flame into the center of the wooden tent. It instantly ignited. He walked toward her, appearing to strut.

"It's like he's utterly pleased with himself," Bancroft commented as he finished tying the last knot. Jahallah rushed to lay out the bedrolls.

"I think it's because he gets to help." Khaly smiled, stroking the dragon's head. She took out the pot and an extra canteen of water she used specifically for cooking. Pouring enough water into the pot so it was full, but not overflowing,

she placed it on the edge of the campfire. Reaching back into her bag she pulled out some potatoes, roots, and herbs, dropping them into the pot.

“Here.” Bancroft returned to his own pack, digging around for a minute before producing what looked like string beans. He handed them to Khaly.

“Where did you get those?” Jahallah asked, joining them at the fire.

“That small wooded area we stayed in last night. When I went to the bathroom I found a small patch. We had already eaten, so I put them in my bag.”

“Well, I hope you picked them before you relieved yourself,” Khaly teased.

“Sure, okay, if that makes you feel better.” He smiled back and the two laughed.

There was a rustling from behind them. As they turned Orantheio gave a small squawk, but they relaxed when Sumora appeared, dragging a bobo; a six-legged, rabbit-like creature that was difficult to catch. She dropped it beside Bancroft, who did all the skinning and cleaning for whatever she brought back.

They ate in silence. Jahallah cleaned their dishes while Khaly found more wood for the fire. When Jahallah returned, she handed Khaly the dishes to repack them. Bancroft and Jahallah started for the lean-to to get some rest, but Khaly had first watch.

“Wait,” she said, reaching into her bag once more. She produced a small package, opening it to reveal a sweet, dark surprise.

“Where did you get that?” Bancroft rushed over.

“Remember that warehouse from a week or so ago.”

He nodded.

“You mean the one that had some sort of supplies we weren’t allowed to see because of your boyfriend,” Jahallah said.

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Khaly gritted her teeth. “Anyway, there was one box they must have thought was empty, but I found this: the last chocolate bar.”

“You’ve had that all this time and didn’t think to share?” Jahallah scoffed.

“I was waiting for the right moment, a good day.”

“And this is a good day?”

“No, but don’t you think today is a good day to have something nice?” Khaly smiled. “Look, do you want some or not?”

“I do.” Bancroft sat down next to Khaly, gratefully taking a piece of chocolate.

Jahallah stuck out her hand and Khaly dropped a sweet into her palm. She walked to their bed, popping it into her mouth, dropping into the padding, and pulling the blankets up.

“You’re welcome,” Khaly said.

“Whatever,” she muttered.

“Just let it go.” Bancroft sighed, rolling his eyes.

Khaly nodded, taking a piece for herself, rewrapped the remainder of the bar, and shoving it into her pack. “You should get some rest. You need to have some visions.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“It’s going to have to. We’re flying blind now, and ‘going east’ is pretty vague. We need something to go on, some sort of direction.”

“I’ll try. Good night, Kay.” He stood up and kissed her on the cheek.

Khaly smiled at him warmly. “Good night, Ban.”

He crawled into the bed, the two dragons nuzzling close to Khaly. “You can go sleep with Bancroft, you know,” she whispered. Their simultaneous response of a small squawk and several clicks told Khaly they preferred to stay with her.

Khaly placed her pack in front of her and pulled out her clothes, placing them in her lap to keep them clean, then dug out the cooking supplies she just packed away, placing them on the ground, careful to not let them clank together. The snores coming from the lean-to told Khaly her companions were exhausted, and she didn’t want to wake them.

She pulled out the remaining item in her bag, which was bundled in several torn pieces of cloth. She unwrapped it, revealing the outer casing of the dragon she’d been working on for their final project. It felt like centuries ago, talking about what to do for their project. There were a number of gears in place, but it was nowhere near being finished. She unraveled another bundle of cloth, filled with spare parts. She collected what she could whenever they went through buildings. When they came across the odd sympathizer to the cause they usually gave her things she thought she could make work.

Khaly reached into one of her backpack’s side pockets, pulling out her tool kit. When her mother had packed this bag for her, she must have had in mind that Khaly finish the dragon. Khaly could only figure the reason she wanted her to

was to bring it to life. It shocked them all to find out she was a Dragon Elemental. Bancroft wanted to find a library so he could research what that meant, exactly, but they hadn't had a chance. The boss had kept them extremely busy, with no time for anything other than eating, sleeping, and training.

She held the casing up to the firelight, not wanting to use her flashlight as it was too bright, and extended use quickly burned down the power supply. She examined the spare parts, finding a few gears in the mix. She inspected one that was the right size, but it had a great deal of rust. Khaly spent the rest of her night watch scraping away the rust to get the gear into working condition. Every so often, Sumora would circle the perimeter and Orantheio would follow along behind. When she did her final round she came back to sit next to Khaly, putting her foot on her knee and yawning. Khaly couldn't help but smile; for some reason, seeing a dragon yawn was comical.

"Go wake him," she whispered.

Sumora went to the tent while Khaly carefully rerolled her dragon and the spare parts, placing it in her pack. As she shoved the remainder of her clothes back into place, Jahallah stepped into the firelight, wrapped in a blanket with her hair in disarray.

Khaly blinked. Bancroft was supposed to take the second watch. "Did you switch with Bancroft?"

"No. I guess your stupid dragons don't understand as much as you think." She sneered.

I think they understand everything perfectly, Khaly thought. "All right, well, there is some more wood—"

"I know where everything is."

Khaly bit her lip, put her hands in the air, and adjourned to the tent. She kicked off her boots and took Jahallah's warm spot, pulling her own blanket over her. She scooted back into Bancroft so he spooned her. Wrapping his arm and blanket around her he moved in closer, the dragons curling up in front.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Khaly, Bancroft, and Jahallah crept up to the barricade surrounding the encampment. People walked about, business as usual. It was dark, and the perimeter past the fire barrels were difficult to see. A man walked past, forcing them to duck down further. He added wood to the barrels, causing the flames to rise.

"Which tent is everything in?" Khaly asked Bancroft as quietly as she could.

"Third one on the left," he whispered.

"Who's left?" Jahallah asked.

"What do you mean, 'who's left'? Everybody's left."

"Don't talk to me like I'm stupid," she yelled. Now it was Khaly's turn to referee. They had been arguing with each other the entire three days' travel it took to get here.

They had been on their own for two weeks, and Bancroft wasn't having any visions that told them what to do. They decided to travel east and hope for the best, avoiding towns and sticking to the woods when possible. Three nights ago, Bancroft finally had a vision. It showed an encampment where they could gather supplies and intelligence, but he didn't know if the people within the camp could be trusted. So they decided to sneak in, get what they needed, and leave. But they were starting to get into bad weather; the nights were colder and their equipment was not suited for the temperature.

"Well, if the shoe fits."

"Guys, come on. We don't have time for this. Why don't you just lead the way, Ban?"

He scooted in front of Khaly so he was the first to round the corner. As he took a quick glance to make sure the way was clear, the face of the man stoking the fires was lit up from the flame as he dropped another log into the barrel. Bancroft took in a sharp breath.

“What is it?” Khaly asked.

“That’s my brother!”

“None of you move,” shouted a voice from behind. “Put your hands up!”

“Which one do you want?” Jahallah said. “Because we can’t do both, you moron.”

Khaly closed her eyes and Bancroft dropped his chin. Khaly was certain Jahallah’s comments were either going to get them killed or beaten, or both.

“Get up,” the man yelled. “Put your hands up and turn around slowly.”

The three eased up, raising their hands as several more people joined and surrounded them. Khaly placed her foot in front of Sumora, who was strutting toward the threat, dragging her so she was behind Khaly’s leg and next to Orantheio. She hoped they were hidden enough by the dark that no one had seen.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Khaly said, her voice steady. “We’re just traveling through and were in need of supplies. That’s it.”

“Uh-huh. We’ll see about that.”

The group started for them and Khaly glanced down, looking at Sumora and giving her a silent plea to take Orantheio and run to shelter until she could come get them. She took another step away from the wall, hoping to cast a larger shadow over the dragons. Jahallah must have noticed her subtle movement because she did the same. Even with their fighting all these months, they now became a small cohesive unit; they were a family and the dragons were their *kids*. They would protect each other at all costs.

“Come on, let’s go.” The man in charge grabbed Khaly’s arm by her jacket and dragged her toward the camp opening. Bancroft was being dragged just ahead. As they rounded the corner into the camp, Khaly risked one last look behind; she couldn’t see the kids at all. She hoped that meant they had got away.

The camp was nestled into a mountainside, protected from the weather and possible attacks. There were a number of tents lining the wide pathway to the small mountain in front of them, and a large opening in the rock lead into the mountain. The group made their way through the corridor, lit with lanterns hung from the walls as well as the occasional fire barrel.

It opened up into a much larger space. Glimmering stalactites decorated the ceiling, and to the right was a waterfall with a clear blue pool beneath it. The

ground was evened out by wooden planks, and several tables with numerous chairs were spread out. Maps of the world hung on a makeshift wall, since the mountainside was too rough. People moved in and out of the area, and opposite them were several tunnels shooting off in different directions.

Their captors pushed them up one of the walkways, and over a large crack in the floor. They were shoved together in the center of the bigger area, where a table stood; this was definitely the hub of operations for this camp. Khaly's mind raced. *Are these people friend or foe?* The last time they were dragged into a hideout it didn't turn out in their favor. This time, the only difference was they had not been bound or beaten before being brought in.

They were brought before a hefty woman wearing a wool overcoat that stopped above her knees. A scarf covered her neck and a wool cap came down her forehead, hiding most of her ears. Her pants seemed to be of a sturdy material, and she wore combat-like boots. Behind her stood a slim man, about a foot taller. He wore a simple button-up jacket with two breast pockets. He had no scarf or hat, but was wearing gloves with the fingers cut off. Khaly noted he looked like a thug.

"Well, looks like our visitors finally showed up," the woman said, smiling. "You can let them go, Raleven." She waved her hand.

Khaly yanked her arm free stepping, forward and toward the woman. She tried desperately not to show fear. "Let us go."

The woman smiled. "Of course, of course. You're not our prisoners."

Khaly started to turn when Bancroft spoke. "You said we 'finally showed up'."

"Yes," she said.

Khaly stopped next to him, but didn't turn. They glanced at each other, and he gave her a knowing look. "How did you know we would show up?" he asked.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Kingsford, you are not the only one with the Air Elemental."

"Who are you?" Khaly spun toward the woman. She didn't like that she knew Bancroft's name, or gift.

"Oh, I'm sorry. That was terribly rude of me. I'm Taithun, and this is Tulyk."

"Where are we?"

“Bancroft’s vision didn’t tell you that?” She was met with stony silence. “All right. We’re the outpost for the Underground. We’re here to help you. We’re on the same side.”

Jahallah scoffed. “Where have we heard that before?” she muttered to Khaly.

“The only help we would like is in the form of supplies, and then we’ll be on our way.”

The woman’s face softened. “I’m truly sorry for what happened to your parents, Khaly.”

Khaly narrowed her eyes at Taithun.

“They did you a huge disservice by not raising you in this world, but it appears you’re adapting well. Have you figured out all your Elementals?”

Khaly kept her lips shut tight. She wasn’t going to give this woman anything.

“Okay, I get it. You don’t trust us. Why would you? The last group you trusted betrayed you, or at least some of them did, but that’s not going to happen here. I promise you.”

Khaly snorted.

Turning to Tulyk the woman gave him a silent command, and he left quickly. “Would you like a seat?” she asked.

“No, I think we’re done talking,” Jahallah said.

“If you’re not going to give us the supplies we need, then we are going to be on our way,” Khaly said.

The woman nodded. “All right, we’ll give you the supplies you need. But I’m hoping you’ll change your mind and stay with us. You’re more valuable than you understand. The three of you are very important to our cause. But, of course, you’ll be joined—” She stopped herself from speaking further. “You’re not in a place to hear anything more, and your mistrust is not unfounded. I’ll explain further at a later time.”

“Bancroft!” A husky voice cried out from behind, and they turned to see his near duplicate. Tall, about six-foot, he was wearing a woolen, waist-length coat, pants, gloves, and cap. Under the latter, several locks of strawberry blond hair poked out. He had a day’s worth of facial hair, and his face was smudged with soot, likely from tending the fire barrels.

“Algernon!” They embraced with a hearty hug.

Khaly knew they hadn't seen each other in almost eleven months. From what Bancroft had told her, Algernon had gone into deep undercover inside the Guild two months before the war broke out.

Bancroft pulled away. The brothers wiped their tears, and Bancroft turned to Khaly and Jahallah. "This is my family," he said, with no hesitation as that was what they now were to each other. "Khaly and Jahallah."

"It's good to finally meet you. I had my vision eight days ago, and thought you'd have been here by now. We were getting worried and were going to send out a scout to find you." His tone was conversational, as if they were already a part of the group.

"The terrain isn't the most hospitable and we lack supplies," Bancroft said, shrugging.

"Where're the kids?" A familiar voice came from behind and Khaly spun before anyone else. Standing next to Taithun was the one known as Boss.

Khaly charged him quicker than anyone could react. With a flying punch she slammed her fist into his jaw, knocking him to the ground. Khaly was about to attack again when Taithun's arm reached around her waist, pulling her back.

"Okay, it looks like we—"

"He's a traitor," she screamed, pushing Taithun away. "If you're working with him, then you're no ally of ours!"

"Khaly, calm down." Algernon stood beside Taithun, blocking Chaith.

"They set us up," Jahallah shouted.

"It wasn't me," Chaith said from the ground. "I had no idea what Nenys was planning. There was no reason to doubt him, and he was always a good man. We worked together for years; he'd been in the Underground for most his life." He stood up, pushing between Taithun and Algernon and rubbing his jaw. "Dang, if you punch that hard then I hate to feel your Spirit Elemental. I guess I trained you a lot better than I thought." He laughed, but Khaly only made to charge again so Bancroft grabbed her arm. "Look, by the time I found out what he was planning it was already too late. When we got to the cavern you were gone. It had been brought down on itself, and there was no trace of you anywhere. No indication that you got out. When I finally got here Algernon told me about his

vision, that you were still alive.” He stepped up to Khaly, standing an arm’s length away. “I meant you no harm, I swear it.”

“You said you had your vision eight days ago,” Khaly spoke to Algernon.

“Yeah, about you coming here, but I also saw you bring down the cavern.” He pointed to Jahallah. “Very impressive. Very impressive indeed.”

Bancroft released her arm and, the second he did, Khaly slapped Chaith across the face, striking his jaw in the same spot. No one moved, and he spoke no words. They stared into each other’s eyes, and Khaly felt tears well up in hers. They had grown close, as close as Jahallah had suggested, but they kept it a semi-professional relationship.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” he whispered, only loud enough for her to hear. “I thought you were dead.”

Khaly gave a small nod, letting loose a tear to run down her cheek. He reached up, wiping it with the back of his fingers. She pushed his hand away.

“Where are the kids?” he asked again, more urgently.

“Who’s kids?” Taithun said, turning to Algernon. “You didn’t say anything about kids.”

He shook his head, shrugging. “I don’t—”

“The dragons,” Jahallah said.

“The woods,” Khaly said.

“They’re not safe in the woods, Khaly. There’s a reason we chose this location.”

“Oh gods.” Bancroft looked at his brother, horror in his eyes. “This is the Dead Rise Mountain.”

Khaly’s eyes became huge and she spun on her heel, bolting for the passageway; Bancroft, Jahallah, Chaith, and Algernon right behind. She spurred herself forward. The Dead Rise Mountain was surrounded by a thick forest, which was home to a deadly creature—the Laalar. It stood seven feet tall, and there was no known way of killing it. Anything it came into contact with was either mutilated or killed. The injuries would become infested with the Laalar’s blood; those wounded slowly turned into the creature. That was how the Laalar procreated.

“Get out of my way,” Khaly screamed as she raced from the mountain. “No,

no, no…” she chanted to herself. As she approached the camp’s opening, two men stood in her way. “Get out of the way,” she screamed again.

“The Laalar has been spotted, we can’t let—”

With a sweep of her hand Khaly tossed the men aside. She yelled over her shoulder as she crossed the threshold. “Stay here!” Everyone but Jahallah and Bancroft stopped.

Algernon grabbed Bancroft’s arm, but he shook himself free. “No!”

A loud, ear-splitting squawk came from the forest and, without any doubt, she knew it was a squawk of terror. Khaly’s heart nearly beat through her chest with fear. What had she done? She sent them into the forest alone.

“Khaly,” Jahallah said. “This way! I see them!” She didn’t wait for the other two to catch up, and Jahallah raced for the small clearing the dragons had been cornered. The Laalar was on them. Without pausing, Jahallah grew the ground around the beast as Bancroft came into sight. He threw out a burst of air, tossing it back into the forest. Khaly was right behind.

“Fly,” she screamed at the same time, running straight for them. That’s when she realized they couldn’t get off the ground.

Jahallah was growing the ground and trees around the Laalar. It was becoming more and more enraged, but she was fighting it with little effort.

“Ban! I need a knife,” Khaly said as she reached the dragons. Their legs were caught in some vines, which seemed to be a sort of trap.

Bancroft snatched the knife off Jahallah’s belt, tossing it to Khaly.

“Watch for others,” Jahallah said, breathing through the exertion. He put his back against hers, giving them a full circle of protection as Khaly cut the bindings off the dragons.

Sumora climbed onto Khaly’s shoulder as if too scared to fly. Khaly grabbed Orantheio and started out of the clearing.

“Let’s go,” she said.

First, Bancroft made it to the edge of the tiny clearing and turned at the same time Jahallah released the growth. The creature was through in a matter of seconds. Jahallah passed Bancroft and he shot out a gust of air, throwing the beast further into the woods. As they ducked under branches and jumped logs,

they could hear the creature howl and scream from behind as it came for them, knocking down trees.

They were steps from the gates, where a small crowd gathered, perhaps to fight off the creature or to make sure no one who was infected got passed the gate. The three moved in unison. Khaly tossed Orantheio to Jahallah, and Sumora jumped to Bancroft. When Khaly was free of her burden, she stopped and spun around, throwing up a wall of fire in front of her and the entrance to the camp.

This didn’t seem to slow the beast down.

Khaly opened her stance, grounding herself, and closed her eyes as she lifted her face to the sky. It was like the heavens themselves opened up, and a series of lightning bolts hit the ground around the beast.

It hesitated for only a brief moment, but the action tired Khaly and she staggered. Jahallah rushed to her side, growing the ground up and pulling in the trees. Bancroft held the beast in place, making a cyclone and catching it in the center. Khaly took a deep breath, trying to bring down the lightning once again, but she didn’t have the strength and was unsure how she had done it the first time. Overhead, she saw Orantheio flying, but he didn’t have much air and seemed to have difficulty staying up. He spat a stream of hot blue flame at the Laalar, and it screeched as it was set ablaze. Jahallah and Bancroft both stopped, releasing the creature from their own gifts.

It was still alive but moving much slower, more concerned, at the moment, with putting out the fire and it staggered back into the woods. The heat from the flames made it feel as if they were standing near the sun. Orantheio was losing altitude.

Khaly pointed and began to move toward him, but she was still weak. Jahallah ran for the dragon as Bancroft lifted Khaly over his shoulder, running for the camp gate. Jahallah cleared it seconds later, Orantheio tucked under her arm. Bancroft put Khaly down and she collapsed to the ground. Jahallah handed Orantheio back to Khaly as she fell onto her back and he flattened himself to her, resting his chin under hers. Sumora gave her a head bump.

Jahallah, Bancroft, and Khaly looked at each other, heaving in unison, a smile on their faces.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Another month passed, and Khaly, Bancroft, and Jahallah remained close-knit even though they felt comfortable in the new camp, knew they could trust people. It took Khaly several days to recover from the battle with the Laalar. Jahallah explained that when she first used her active Elemental it had exhausted her the same way. Bancroft also experienced some fatigue while he was learning his active Elemental. During this time, they were never asked to go on any of the missions others went on.

"They're simply gathering intelligence," Taithun told Khaly. "Your team is much too valuable to be sent on recon missions."

"Too valuable?"

"Your parents really *did* do you a disservice."

"I wish people would stop saying that to me."

"Khaly, you came from a very strong ancestry. It surprised everyone to discover Hettie never raised you in this world."

"Why?"

"Your mother was one of the founders of the Underground. That's why they killed her. She had information they wanted, and she wouldn't give it up."

"My father?"

"He wasn't an Elemental, but he was aware of the movement. He never opposed us. He loved you and your mom dearly, and died for you."

Khaly shook her head. So much had happened over the past few months, so much she didn't understand. All she knew was that, when she took her aptitude tests, she had tested high in technology. She had no idea about Elemental Gifts. Now, she had brought two dragons to life, could toss chairs with her mind, bring down lightning from the sky, and create a wall of flames. The gods only knew what else she could do.

"That's a conversation for another day. Khaly, we have a mission for you and

your companions. We've tracked Chahara's group to a building in the business district in Vlarlee. We want you to go in and destroy the compound."

"That's four days' travel from here. What makes you think they'll even still be there when we arrive?"

"They've been there for a few weeks now," Chaith said, coming in through one of the side tunnels. "It looks like their main base of operations."

Khaly put her hands on her hips. "Why would she return to the city? She has to know she's wanted."

"Who would she be hiding from?" Chaith took a seat at the table, putting his feet up and pulling out an apple from his pocket. "She's been working with the Guild since the beginning. Hell, we're certain she's running the whole thing." With his knife he cut off a piece of the apple, offering it to Khaly. The two had grown close in the time they originally worked together, and had only gotten closer in the short time they had been at the new camp.

She pursed her lips, taking the slice. "Did she know about me?" she asked Taithun. "Did she know I was an Elemental?"

"We don't believe so. Otherwise, I'm certain she would've turned on your father quicker."

"It was Orantheio then. When I brought him to life? That tipped her off?"

"Yeah, probably," Chaith said.

Khaly stood in front of the table, piles of paper and maps laid out. She chewed the inside of her cheek, not sure if she even wanted to go back to Vlarlee.

"Khaly? We need to move quickly here," Taithun said.

Khaly's eyes drifted to Chaith for a moment, and he offered her another piece of his apple. She shook her head, turning back to Taithun. "I'll have to talk to my family first." Not waiting for a response she left the large room.

Khaly threw back the flap to their tent. Jahallah was lying on one of the bunks and Bancroft was reading a book about explosives. They had a low firepit, built into the ground; the smoke rose to the top of the tent, escaping through tiny slits. Sumora and Orantheio were laid out by the rocks, soaking up the heat.

"Hey, Kay, what's the word?" Bancroft greeted, laying the book on his chest.

"Out with your boyfriend?" Jahallah asked.

“I was talking to Taithun. She has a job—” She focused in on the book on Bancroft’s chest. “What are you reading?”

“What? Oh, my brother gave it to me. He suggested I learn some new skills.” He shrugged with indifference.

“What kind of job?” Jahallah said.

“Uh, well, looks like they tracked down Chahara’s group. They want us to go in and destroy their compound.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I said I had to talk to you guys first.” Khaly sat down on the couch Jahallah had created from the earth. Orantheio jumped onto her lap, and she opened her cloak to allow him to lay flat on her body then covered him back up.

“When do we leave?” Bancroft asked.

“What?” Jahallah sat up, swinging her feet over the edge. “You want to go on a mission these people put together?”

Khaly knew Jahallah still had a great deal of mistrust, no matter how often they tried to convince her it was unfounded. This was why she had wanted to ask before accepting the job.

“If my brother says to go, I’m going.” He shrugged.

Khaly stared at the fire, deep in thought.

“Khaly, are you considering this?” Jahallah asked.

“What if I were?”

“He’s learning about explosives, so they must expect us to blow the place up.”

“That’s what I got from the conversation I had.”

“We could die!”

Khaly laughed. “How is it any different than you collapsing that cavern?”

“I don’t know, it just is.”

“Jahallah, if you don’t want to come I would understand; but we need you.” She watched her over the fire. “Chahara was the reason my parents were tortured and mutilated. She’s likely the reason your family is gone, too. Any chance I have to take her out, I’ll take.”

“Not to mention she was the catalyst to this war,” Bancroft said.

“I’m going, Jahallah, and from what it sounds like, so is Ban. So, what’s it gonna be? You in or out?”

“Gods, I hate you people,” she said with a snarl, lying back down.

“Was that a yes or no?”

“Of course I’m going. Can you not be stupid for one day?”

A small smile formed on Khaly’s lips and she nodded. “I’ll let Taithun know. They want us to leave right away.”

“Of course they do.”

Khaly leaned back into the couch, looking at the pieces of her new dragon spread out on the low table in front of her. Bancroft watched her for a minute.

“Can you bring it to life now?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Khaly pulled her eyes away to meet his. “It isn’t working as a robot yet. I don’t want to bring it to life and find it’s in pain, or can’t function. Plus, I need some golinum and a few extra pieces.”

“Well, since we’re going back to Vlarlee, we can probably find what you need there.”

Khaly smiled.

“After we kill Chahara and her army, of course,” he added.

“Of course.” They shared a laugh, then Bancroft returned to his book and Khaly turned her attention to her unfinished dragon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The small group of four, plus the dragons, crouched behind an abandoned truck in the Vlarlee's warehouse district. Khaly's group never dreamed they would return to the city, and were none too happy about it. The area contained four bulking warehouses and an office building; three of the four were blatantly abandoned. The doors were rusted and falling off, or were held shut with wooden boards. The windows were broken, and one roof had collapsed in on itself—an obvious effect from a fire which took place at some point. Yet the office building was in good condition, and the warehouse beside it looked as though it had gone untouched by time and the war.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Jahallah whispered to Bancroft.

"Positive. I saw all this in my vision. There should be a door on the opposite wall, and a set of stairs that leads down to the lower levels." He pointed to the building directly across from them. "That one there."

"Why would Chahara set up in a business building?"

"It's a perfect hiding place. It's in plain sight," Chaith said, who had been instructed to accompany them on the mission despite Jahallah's and Bancroft's protests. Yet Khaly felt it was a good idea, as they could use the extra help in case of trouble. His Elemental Gifts were well-honed and strong. "Now, we all know what we're supposed to do. Right?"

"This is so stupid." Jahallah had been fighting this idea since Algernon had his vision. It didn't help that those Bancroft had two nights before were of a different location. "We're all going to die in there."

"Algernon's visions are never wrong," Chaith said.

"Well, this wasn't his vision; he saw somewhere completely different," she said.

"Are you saying you don't trust me?" Bancroft narrowed his eyes.

"Okay, enough." Khaly grabbed Bancroft's arm. "You have your charges?"

“Yes.”

“You and Jahallah set your charges in the office building and the warehouse. I’ll take Chaith and the dragons and check out the lower levels of that building.”

“I know the plan. I’m not an idiot,” Jahallah said.

Ignoring her comment Khaly looked at Chaith, who gave her one quick nod. She stood and ran around the back of the truck, heading toward the doors at the back of the office building. Jahallah and Bancroft waited until Khaly had opened the door.

There was a basic keypad for security. She rubbed the back of her neck. It was a fairly generic security setup; she knew Chahara had more skill than this. She stared at it, contemplating its simplicity, concerned it was a trap.

“What’s wrong?” Chaith asked after a minute of her not doing anything.

“Nothing, I’m sure it’s fine.”

He grabbed her elbow, concern crossing his face.

“It’s fine,” she said, more reassuringly this time. She removed the plastic plate, carefully working the wires. It took her only a few seconds to circumvent the security system, and the door popped open. Chaith held it, waving for the other two to come out. Khaly stepped inside, followed closely by the dragons. Jahallah and Bancroft rounded the corner quickly and Chaith entered after, gently closing the door.

Bancroft looked at his watch. “I’ll set the charges at exactly one a.m. You will have five minutes before the first goes off.” The other three checked their own watches, setting the time. “If you’re not out at 1:05 a.m., the building will come down on you.”

“No hanging around. Once you’ve done your job, move to the warehouse and take care of it. Then meet up at the rendezvous point,” Chaith said.

The four quickly split off; Jahallah and Bancroft starting down the hall to a set of stairs, while Khaly and Chaith went to another door behind them, indicating there was a basement. Khaly quietly opened the door, peeking around the corner. As she always did, Sumora took point and Orantheio stayed close behind. Chaith pulled up the rear.

They moved quickly down; after three flights, they reached the bottom.

“This is likely the boiler room, Khaly. We won’t find anything.”

“We should check anyway, just to be sure.”

Chaith pursed his lips, but followed her in. He was right, it was only the boiler room and there was nothing to note. They took no time going back up a flight and entering the next door onto an open space with tables laid out. They stepped causally into the lab-like room, finding bits and pieces of circuit boards lying about. It was as if someone had left in a hurry.

“Do you think they knew we were coming?” Khaly asked.

“Anything is possible.”

Khaly glared.

“What? It’s true.”

“That’s not very helpful.”

He shrugged, unapologetic. They spent several minutes looking around the area, then went up to the next level. Khaly was becoming extremely agitated. Chahara had to be here; Bancroft had seen her here. They opened another door, revealing another open-concept room. The windows indicated they were now at least aboveground. Metal stairs led up to a door, which seemed to exit the building on the right side. The left set of stairs looked as though it went into an observation deck, complete with large tinted windows.

Khaly’s eyebrows knit together and she looked at Chaith. He was studying the room closely, walking to the center then staring at the wall behind them. Khaly joined him, turning to see what he was looking at. There were scorch marks on the wall, as if it had been fired at, but not with rounds of bullets. The marks looked to have been made by a heat source. Figures were outlined on the wall, like someone had been standing against it when whatever cause the marks was fired.

Khaly’s mouth fell open and she looked at Chaith, whose jaw was set and nostrils flared. He looked down to see her face, merely confirming what she feared. Those who had been taken were brought here to meet an even more gruesome death.

“They were testing weapons in here. On people,” he said, mostly to himself.

“What do you think is up there?” Khaly asked, pointing to the windows of the room looking into the one they were in.

They started for the stairs on the right when Chaith checked his watch. “Khaly,

we need to get a move on it. Bancroft has already—" There was a loud bang from the direction they were heading. Khaly froze, one foot on the stairs, and turned to Chaith. He was looking up to the room now, too. Someone appeared on the staircase on the left. For the first time in a year, Khaly stood in the same room as Chahara. Frozen, unable to put the whole thing together, Khaly couldn't move or speak.

The woman who stood in front of her was supposed to be a friend; not just hers, but one of her father's. Khaly didn't want to believe the stories that Chahara had anything to do with the war. She didn't want to believe Chahara had turned her father in, got her parents killed, and was building an army of frightening, unknown devices—or that she was murdering those who had a chance of defending themselves.

Chahara held a box and seemed startled to see Khaly, but recovered quickly.

Chahara remained on the stairs. "I had no idea—"

"I can't believe you've done this." Khaly took a step toward her, forcing her to back up one step. A door lead into the room, likely to a hallway or escape route.

"Done what? What is it you think I've done?" Chahara asked slowly.

"What do you think? You killed my parents and wiped out my school, this city, and all the towns in the area."

"We only cleansed those who wouldn't see the way," she said. Her voice was conversational, smooth.

"What way would that be?"

"Elementals can't be trusted. They're dangerous animals. And, like dangerous animals, they need to be eliminated."

"You're an Elemental, Chahara." Chaith gritted his teeth, hands clenched.

"Hello, Chaith." She focused in on him. "It's good to see you. I was so worried when you didn't come home."

Bancroft and Jahallah reached the top of the first flight of stairs and cautiously opened the door. They stepped into the hallway, following it for a short time before reaching another door. They exchanged glances before Bancroft took a deep breath, turned the knob, and pushed it open. The room was large, filled with metal tables laden with manual tools, electric tools, and spare parts.

They separated to further explore the room. Jahallah picked up a piece of a robotic hand, the palm open and wires exposed.

“This must be where they pieced together the smaller parts,” she said, placing the item back on the table. “Bancroft?” She looked about the room but couldn’t see him. “Bancroft!”

“What?” He stepped out from around a corner.

“What are you doing?” She moved across the room to join him, and as she did he pulled a large piece of paper off the wall and rolled it up. “What is that?”

“Blueprints.” He stretched out his hand to give her the roll.

“Why do I want it?”

“Put it in your bag.”

She scrunched her face. “Why don’t you put it in yours? You’re the one that wants them.

“Because I’m carrying all the charges, that’s why. Now, come on.” He waved them in front of her.

“Fine.” She snatched the blueprints and shoved them in her bag.

“Let’s go.” Bancroft went toward the door. “I’ll need to be at least another three floors up before I can start setting charges.”

“Why aren’t we setting them in the basement?”

Bancroft grabbed the doorknob and faced Jahallah, pursing his lips as if considering something. “Because I’m going to pancake the building, not tip it over.” He opened the door, stepping into the hall and rushing to the next set of stairs. Instead of taking the side ones they had taken previously he decided to use the main staircase, which must have been used when the building was in operation.

Jahallah jogged up behind him. “Pancaking? What does that mean?”

“I’m going to set the smaller charges at the top, then one last big charge in the center of the building.” He stopped halfway up the stairs to face her. “When the first charges go the floors will collapse in on themselves, then the next charge will be on the floor below, collapsing the building further, then the next and the next.” He made a gesture with his hands, miming something being squished. “The weight of the building will cause it to collapse inward on itself, resulting in complete and total annihilation.”

“That’s terrifying, Bancroft.”

“Yes, it is,” he said, turning back to start up the stairs again. “We don’t have much time to set these, so let’s get a move on it.”

They took two stairs at a time, ascending six more flights. When they reached their final destination they were both sweating and breathing heavily. Bancroft glanced at his watch. Jahallah was using the wall for support as she tried to catch her breath.

“Are we there yet?” she whined.

“Yeah, I think this will do.” He started for the glass doors in front of them. It appeared this floor had been used for office space.

Jahallah followed behind, every so often picking up pieces of paper, reading them, and then throwing them away; nothing noteworthy. They weaved through cubicles until Bancroft stopped in what he perceived to be the center of the room, kneeling next to a large pillar.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m setting up the first charge.”

“Here?”

“It’s a support beam, Jahallah.” He was exasperated and growing tired of her constant questions, but when she only looked at him without response he explained further. “I blow up this one, and three others on this floor, and it will collapse. Then we go back down and repeat the process on the next four levels.”

“Well, why didn’t you set them as we were coming up?”

Bancroft knew she never wanted to do this mission, and her attitude showed it. “Were you not paying attention in our last meeting?” He stood, holding the explosive device in his hand.

Jahallah bit her lip. That was the only answer Bancroft needed.

“Just be ready to run when I say run. Once I set the charges on this floor, we’ll only have fifteen minutes to set the rest and get out of the building before it blows.”

“Fifteen minutes!” She gaped at him. “Why would you only give us fifteen minutes?”

Bancroft smiled, trying to contain his laughter.

“What’s so funny? Why are you laughing?”

“Do you honestly think I would set the charges off before even putting the others in place?” He shook his head, kneeling back down to attach the device to the pillar. “And you say I’m the stupid one.” Her lack of response told Bancroft she agreed, at least to some degree.

Jahallah waited somewhat patiently for him to finish setting the other three charges on the floor, then followed him down to the next. Bancroft repeated the same steps through the next three floors. As he set the last charge he pulled out a second device. It had a small screen with several buttons containing both numbers and symbols. He input a five-digit code, looked at his watch, then hit a red button on the device. A second later, a double-beep brought the explosives to life and the timer started counting down.

Bancroft shot up off the floor, grabbed Jahallah’s elbow, and ushered her to the door. “Come on, we gotta go.”

“You’re not joking this time?” Her voice was shaking.

“Nope, it actually might be better if we run,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"You're a traitor to your own kind," Chaith yelled, jabbing a finger in Chahara's direction.

"Who you once loved," she said.

Khaly was confused; he acted as though he didn't know who Chahara was when they first met. She couldn't help but stand and watch, her mouth open.

"Everyone makes mistakes," said Chaith, his voice was even. "So, what now?"

"You have a choice, love. Come with me or die." Her voice was too sweet and Khaly couldn't stand it.

"I think I would prefer the latter."

With a sly smile, Chahara raised a hand. As she did, the first of Bancroft's five explosives went off. The room rocked, causing some of the ceiling plaster to come loose and fall to the ground. Chahara was thrown backward onto the stairs, her eyes wide. Khaly started toward her as Chahara ran for the top of the stairs, reaching the door.

Swinging the door open, Chahara hadn't noticed Orantheio make his way to her, spitting a fireball at her when he reached the bottom step. Narrowly missing, the ball struck the wall behind her and caused another small explosion. This time it knocked down a weak support beam, blocking the door.

Khaly couldn't move, feeling as though her feet had been nailed to the floor. She stared at Chaith, disbelief on her face. But he took no notice; his attention was on their escape route.

Khaly finally found her voice. "You two were in a relationship?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Two years."

"And you loved her?"

“Do we have to talk about this right now?” He didn’t wait for her response; the situation was about to get much worse and they needed to get out of the building.

“How much time do we have before the next one?” Khaly yelled, starting for the door form which Chahara had exited.

“Less than a minute. Khaly, we have to get out of here.” Just as the words came from his mouth another *boom* rocked the building, bringing down more of the ceiling.

“You said a minute!”

“I said, less than a minute.”

Khaly pursed her lips, continuing toward the door.

“We don’t have time, Khaly. We have to get out of here. This way!” He pointed to the staircase on the right but Khaly was already at the left, where Chahara had escaped. “Khaly!”

“I can’t let her get away—” Another boom was heard, the third of Bancroft’s charges, as the timer came to an end. Khaly was already on the stairs, only two steps away from the door, when the next explosion went off, bringing the ceiling down around the door and completely blocking her way. The force knocked her back, causing her to fall down the stairs. Sumora and Orantheio narrowly escaped.

Chaith climbed over pieces of fallen debris, finally reaching her. “We can’t go that way; that’s not a door to the outside. With any luck she’s trapped on the other side, but if we stay here any longer we’ll also be trapped.” Another charge was released, causing the building to shudder.

After looking at the door one last time, Khaly gave a defeated nod. She tried to stand, but a scream escaped her lips and she was forced her back down.

Chaith rushed back. “What’s wrong?”

“I think I broke my ankle in the fall.”

He lifted her pant leg to reveal her ankle, which was swollen and quickly turning purple. He hauled her off the ground. Khaly winced in pain as he heaved her over her shoulder and walked to the opposite side of the room. Orantheio and Sumora slowly picked their own way through the rubble.

“Just great.” Chaith snarled, seeing the path to the door was blocked. He

leaned Khaly against the wall, looking about the room for another way out. The way they had entered was now also impossible to reach. No one noticed Sumora back up, clicking, and staring up at the windows.

“How many charges have gone off?” Khaly asked, trying to ignore the pain in her ankle.

“Four, and the last one is the doozy; it will bring this building down on top of us.”

Bancroft opened the hallway door, shoving Jahallah through. Without protest, she started running for the stairs.

It took them only a few minutes to reach the bottom floor, and as Bancroft hit the last stair and Jahallah ran for the back exit, the first of the five explosives went off. The ceiling tiles gave way, dropping dust and dirt upon them. Jahallah’s eyes widened, and she was about to say something when Bancroft grabbed her wrist as he ran past, dragging her with him. They reached the door and found it bolted.

“What are we going to do?” Jahallah was frantic. “I can’t use my Elemental in here; there’s nothing to grow.”

“Step back.” Bancroft took a couple paces backward, steadying his breath and widening his stance. He concentrated as he balled up the air around him, pulling in as much as he could, then throwing it at the door. As the burst of air hit the door, the second round of explosives went off, knocking them both off balance and blowing the door from its hinges.

They didn’t say a word, but ran out of the building and tried to gain as much distance possible. Bancroft turned to look at his handiwork. The first few floors didn’t seem to have been impacted; the windows were broken out, but it otherwise looked intact.

“What happened? I thought you knew what you were doing?” Jahallah put her hands on her hips, looking up.

“Well, I just learned how to build bombs, I’ve never—” The third explosive detonated, breaking glass and causing it to rain down. Bancroft easily raised an air shield, and the two watched as the first two floors began to collapse. “Ha!” Bancroft shouted, pumping his fist in the air. “I knew it would work.” His grin

couldn’t get any wider. He turned to Jahallah, but she was running toward the warehouse. “What are you doing? Don’t you want to see it?”

“Come on,” she shouted over her shoulder. “Our work isn’t done yet.”

“*Our* work,” he mumbled as he laid chase. “I’m the one who’s done all the work.”

They reached the back entrance of the warehouse as they felt the fourth explosion. Bancroft glanced at his watch; 1:09 a.m.

“What’s wrong?” Jahallah asked, concerned.

“I’m just hoping the others got out in time.”

She reached over, grabbing his wrist and twisting it to read the time. “Khaly would’ve made sure to keep an eye on the time. They won’t be anywhere near the building. They’ll be halfway to the rendezvous point by this time.”

Khaly and Chaith watched each other for a long moment, trying to figure out their options, when Orantheio let out a loud squawk, alarming them both.

They followed his gaze up to the windows, six feet above and not meant to be opened.

“I think he wants us to use the windows,” Khaly said.

“Yeah, I got that.” Chaith looked around and picked up a large brick from a support beam.

“Don’t use that tone with me.” Khaly narrowed her eyes. “I’m the one who has the right to be angry. You lied to me.”

“Not now, Khaly.” He grabbed her, moving her out of the way. Throwing the brick as hard as he could he connected with the window, shattering it. Khaly couldn’t help her look of surprise. It seemed the windows should have been much harder to break. She assumed they had been weakened by the explosions.

“Okay, let’s go,” he said, carrying her to the window. “I’ll lift you up, then you’ll help me.”

“If not now, then when?” She used her good foot to boost herself onto the windowsill, knocking shards of glass out of the way.

“Tick-tock, Khaly,” he called from below.

She rolled her eyes, pulling herself onto the windowsill and straddling it. “Toss me the dragons, they won’t be able to fly out of here.”

Chaith promptly nodded, picking up Orantheio. Holding him with both hands he squatted, tossing Orantheio straight up as hard as he could. Khaly never thought Orantheio's eyes could open so wide; if it was any other situation, she would have thought it comical. He spread out his wings to glide closer and she reached out, grabbing him then releasing him quickly once he was clear of the window frame. Just as she let him go, she heard Sumora. Khaly grabbed her and did the same.

"Your turn," she said, grimly praying she would be able to haul him up.

Chaith took several paces back, gauging the distance, then took a run at the wall. He jumped just before he hit, gripping the wall with the ball of his foot and pushing himself up while reaching for the windowsill. He was able to catch the edge and Khaly gripped his wrist, helping him get a hand up. He pulled himself up, making it look easy. Then she noticed the blood dripping from his hand; he had cut himself on some glass shards she missed.

"Go, Khaly."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"It's, like, an eight-foot drop."

"We don't have time for this, Khaly. Bancroft's last charge will be go off any second."

She gritted her teeth, wanting to be brave, but knowing that if she landed the wrong way she could break her other ankle. The thought paralyzed her.

Pulling himself all the way up, and without a word, Chaith continued to exit out the window. Khaly thought he was going to fall on his head, but he put one hand on the outside wall while still gripping the windowsill with the other. For a brief moment his body was horizontal to the ground; then, in a smooth, quick motion, he brought his feet in, grabbed the windowsill with his other hand, and righted himself before dropping and tucking into a roll. He stood up, holding out his arms.

"Come on," he said.

"Don't drop me."

"Seriously? Just come on."

Khaly pulled herself the rest of the way out, gripping the edge of the window.

Stretching her arms out as far as they would go, she let go of the ledge. Expecting to hit the ground hard, she was instead greeted by Chaith's hands around her waist, landing relatively soft. He spun with her still in his arms, running away from the building.

"Go. Fly," he screamed at the dragons. They both followed his command and were in the air in seconds, flying for the opposite building.

The following explosion shook the ground, debris flying in every direction. It tossed them several yards, and they hit the dirt and pavement, winding them both. Chaith rolled over as more debris came at them, covering Khaly with is body and throwing up a shield of air protecting them from falling shrapnel.

"I thought you were a Water Elemental," she said.

"I am." He dropped the shield and helped her to her feet. "Manipulating water is just like manipulating air, easier actually. Do we really need to talk about this now?"

"What else don't I know about you?" Khaly watched his face as he half carried her to where the dragons were hiding.

"Nothing."

"Really nothing at all?"

"Khaly, not now." Chaith picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder.

"I can walk on my own."

"You can't move quickly enough, and we need to be farther away before that building collapses completely."

"This is not comfortable." She winced as she bounced on his shoulder, waves of pain shooting through her body.

"Put your hand on my lower back."

"What?"

"Just do it."

She complied. It was a little more comfortable; she was able to lift herself a bit, and her hip bones didn't grind as much against his shoulder.

They reached a building a safe distance away and he put her down. She collapsed and he crouched next to her, watching as the floors of the office building began to give out and it crashed into a heap. The dragons dropped down a minute later, Sumora increasing her size and hissing at something in the

opposite direction. A man came quickly around the corner. Just as quick Chaith tossed a knife in his direction, connecting with the man's neck. He dropped.

"You throw knives, too? I didn't see that in any of the hand-to-hand training you gave us."

"That wasn't hand to hand, now was it?"

"Semantics," she said with a scowl. "Are you going to show me how to do that?"

"Not now, Khaly."

There was another earth-rocking explosion, and the warehouse next to the building they had left began to crumble. Bancroft and Jahallah were to set charges in there as well, as it was suspected whatever Chahara was building would be stored there. So, if they were to find anything, they were to blow it up as well.

"Looks like those two found something," Chaith said.

Khaly sighed, relieved. "Well, we know they got out all right. They should be at least halfway to the rendezvous point."

Bancroft stood and watched the building collapse until Jahallah shook him from his trance.

"Let's get in there and blow this place up." She slapped a hand on his shoulder, pushing him toward the security keypad.

"Why don't you open it?" he asked.

"What?"

"You know. I haven't seen you do anything techie."

"Techie?"

"Yeah, with anything that has to do with hardware or electronics you always seem to find a way to avoid the work. What's up with that?" He reached in his pocket, pulling out a tool kit that looked a lot like Khaly's. "You went to Pifianka Academy, too."

Jahallah's cheeks pinked up as she dug her toe into the dirt. Bancroft eyed her, hooking up the small circuit board to give false readings to the security pad.

"Jahallah?"

"My dad was on the board, okay. He got me into the school. I didn't score very

high on any of my aptitude tests."

The door popped open and Bancroft stood up, shoving his tools into his bag, his mouth open and eyes staring. "But you had some of the highest test scores."

"I had good partners." She flushed even more deeply. "All I had to do was memorize the information for the written exams."

"Wow, that's impressive." Bancroft walked into the warehouse, looking about the dark room. "I mean, you were there for what? Four years?" he whispered as the two moved further into the space. "That takes some real talent on your part to fake your way through all that, *and* still come out thinking you're better than everyone else."

"I didn't fake my way through all of it. I do know some things; just not like you and Khaly."

"That must have hurt to say." Bancroft smiled, stopping to look at her in the dim light.

"What?"

"Saying that Khaly is smarter than you."

"Whatever; I never said that. You're such an idiot."

"Uh-huh." He brought his attention back to the large space, squinting to better see. The room seemed to have a number of dark forms, all lined up, but it was too dark to see what they were. "Where's that flashlight of Khaly's?"

Jahallah dug in her bag before producing it and shoving it into Bancroft's outstretched hand. He turned it on. As the light fanned through the room, both their mouths dropped at the sight: Six rows of twelve large robots stood in front of them, all at least seven or eight feet tall.

"Dear gods," Bancroft breathed. They both walked toward the robots, stopping in front of the first they encountered. "I think these are the same as the ones from the cavern where Nenys attacked us." He took the flashlight and walked around the robot, taking in its magnitude.

"Will the explosives you have be enough to destroy them?" Jahallah asked as he came back around.

Slowly, he shook his head. "No. I think the most it will do is bring the warehouse down on them, but if the other survived the rocks you collapsed on top of it the first time...what I have won't be enough."

“What if we rigged them to blow up, along with our explosives?”

Bancroft considered it for a moment. “I know Khaly could do it easily in her sleep, but they’re long gone by now.” He stepped back, staring at the robot. A smile crossed his face as he pulled his tool kit from his bag; he then looked about the room until he found what he was looking for. Running to the wall he grabbed a small step ladder. Jahallah watched in silence. As he placed the ladder in front of the robot, the final explosion from the other building went off, blowing out the windows of the warehouse and causing the ground to shake.

The two exchanged a glance before he returned to his previous task. He stepped onto the ladder and started working at the panel on the front of the robot. Heaving it off he handed it to Jahallah. She grunted under the weight, and by the time she had put it down Bancroft had already pulled out a large bundle of wiring and a circuit board from its chest. He crinkled his brow as he examined the creation’s inner workings. He removed the circuit board completely then stepped down from the ladder.

“Okay, see this right here?” He pointed to two pegs on the board, then pointed to the robot. “There were two cables attached to each one to close the circuit and allow remote access to the robot.”

“Just this little board controls that entire thing?”

“Well, no, just a portion. I’m sure, if we took the head off, it would be a whole other thing, but for what we are going to do this is all we need.” He handed her the board and dug out one of the explosives. “Now, see this cable here? If we detach this cable and attached it to the motherboard, closing that circuit with one of the cables from the robot, then I should be able to use the entire robot as an explosive.” He smiled, proud of the fact he had come up with the idea.

“Then why do we need the motherboard? Why not just shove the bomb inside the robot?”

Bancroft stared at her for a moment, then looked to the robot. It was a few minutes before he spoke, and that was only because Jahallah cleared her throat.

“That might actually work better,” he said finally. Jahallah gave a smug smile. “Then, what we will need to do is make sure we shove the bomb far enough inside the chest so the power supply blows with it.”

Jahallah nodded, taking a step back and looking out at the sea of towering

mechanical men. “If we placed the four bombs evenly throughout the middle robots, it should take them all out. It will help cast a wide net.” She made a sweeping motion with arms to show her meaning.

“All right, let’s get started. It won’t be long before somebody comes to check out the first explosions.” He reached into his pack, producing two bombs and handing them to Jahallah. “Just push this orange button here three—no, five—times, then this green button here.”

“What does that do?”

“It will arm the bombs and give us five minutes to get the heck out of here.”

“Then we should make sure we set them at the same time.”

“Good point.”

The two made their way into the middle rows, quickly discussing which robots would best suit their purposes, then making fast work of removing the chest plates and pulling out the wiring until the gears were exposed. Once the machines were prepared they planted the bombs, arming them at the same moment then moving to the next one.

Not hesitating to check the rest of the building, they both ran for the door they entered, but it was barred with a security bar. It was bolted to the walls and the center of the door; an extra security measure put into place, one they hadn’t taken notice of when they entered.

“What the hell?” Jahallah yelled, panicked.

“There must have been an extra keypad inside I missed.” He glanced around, but the only windows were twenty feet up. “Can’t you grow something?”

“What Bancroft? What could I possibly grow in here? Concrete and metal are not natural elements. What about you? Do your air thing!”

They both took a pace backward as Bancroft pulled in the air around him, then pushed it out as hard as he could. The door didn’t move. He tried again, throwing it harder, but still the door wouldn’t budge.

“It’s too strong. I can’t do it.” He shook his head.

She grabbed his wrist, twisting it to see his watch. “Those things are going to blow up in two minutes!”

“I know, I know.” He ran back into the room, Jahallah close behind. He

scanned the area, thinking there had to be another way out. They had come through the back way, so there had to be a front door.

Running down the length of the building, in front of the robot formation, he found no door at the opposite corner, so he ran to the next wall.

“What are you doing?” Jahallah shouted from behind.

“There has to be another door, maybe some bay doors. How else did they get those things in here?”

Jahallah stopped dead and closed her eyes, concentrating, sweat beading on her forehead.

“What are you doing?” Bancroft ran to her and grabbed her wrist, but she lifted her index finger and he halted.

Her eyes flew open. “Quickly, this way,” she shouted, running through the robots, en route for the diagonal corner. Reaching it, they found a large, garage-type door half the height of the building and wide enough for two of the robots. A light ticking sound started behind them, and Bancroft scrambled to find the lever to open the door.

“What’s that?” Jahallah stopped, searching the area with her eyes.

“15…14…13…” Bancroft said, panting.

Jahallah’s eyes widened. “Are you counting down—”

“12…11…”

“Here!” She shouted, finding a wheel with a chain on it. She fumbled with the latch.

“9…8…” Finally getting the latch off they both started to turn the wheel, slowly at first, but Bancroft’s counting was enough motivation to power through. “6…5…”

They cleared a small opening just big enough for them to roll under. Without stopping his count, Bancroft grabbed Jahallah’s shoulder and shoved her toward the door. She dropped to the ground, rolling under, Bancroft so close behind he nearly rolled over her. He got to his feet first and dragged her off the ground, moving away from the building as fast as he could.

“3…2…”

BOOM.

The shockwave from the force of the explosion tossed them both several feet.

Debris rained down, several large chunks of metal narrowly missing Bancroft. His vision was blurred from the knock he took to his head, and he threw his hands out to manipulate the air around them and form a shield.

His head pounded; he felt weak and his shield was, too. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he struggled to keep the larger objects from penetrating. Jahallah scrambled to her feet and ran toward him, grabbed the collar on the back of his jacket and dragged him away. He struggled to keep the shield up. By the time they were far enough away, no more debris fell and the building was completely demolished.

“Did we destroy everything?” Jahallah asked, still holding his collar.

“I think so.”

“Good.” She collapsed, slipping into unconsciousness.

Bancroft attempted to stand, but his body wouldn’t respond. It was only seconds before he, too, lost consciousness.

Khaly and Chaith were hidden behind a building, she resting on the on the ground while Chaith stood and scanned the area.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m trying to see if anyone else made it out of the building.”

“Besides us?”

“Obviously.”

“Do you think Chahara got out?” Khaly struggled to get up, but her ankle couldn’t handle any of her weight.

He grabbed her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I don’t know. Come on, we gotta get out of here.” As he turned to pick her up they heard another explosion, but it wasn’t anywhere near them. Chaith looked around the corner.

“What was that?” Khaly asked, unable to see.

“I don’t know, but there are flames and black smoke rising up from the distance.” He pointed in the direction of the explosion.

“Did Bancroft set extra charges?”

“I don’t think so, but we gotta go.” He grabbed her right wrist with his left hand and placed his right arm between her legs, lifting her easily off the ground and draping her over his shoulders like a scarf.

“This isn’t much better.”

He ignored her complaint. He took off in a light jog; although she was being bounced around, Khaly could tell he was trying not to. The dragons were able to keep up easily with the pace, but Khaly kept close tabs on both of them.

After at least twenty minutes of constant movement, the pain throughout Khaly’s body started to get to her.

“I need to stop,” she said. He kept going, as if not hearing. “Chaith, I have to stop.”

“I heard, but I need to find better cover.”

It was at least another five minutes before he approached a back alley in a sub-division of the city. The sun was still down; it was only two-thirty in the morning. The alleys between the buildings were never lit. He placed her gently on the ground, his chest rising and falling rapidly, sweat dripping down his face. Seconds later, there came another explosion. They exchanged a look. This one was also nowhere nearby.

“What the hell is going on?” Khaly asked through gritted teeth. Her back and ribs were throbbing, the adrenaline now completely gone from her system.

Chaith shook his head. “There’s no way that was Jahallah and Bancroft.”

“How do you know?”

“Because that’s on the other side of the city. In Tower City. They never would have had enough time to get there.”

Tower City was comprised of high-rise business buildings and residential condos. It was one of the richer parts of town, and they had all the amenities. If you lived or worked in Tower City, you were one of the elite citizens of Feesia.

They slowly made their way to the opposite end of the street. Surprisingly, considering the number of explosions, there was no one in sight. Khaly leaned up against a wall by the corner and Chaith stood in front of her, peeking around the best he could.

Khaly looked down to see Sumora start for the street. “Hey, you get back here,” she whispered.

Sumora clicked at her, but backed up into the shadows once again.

“No talking back.”

Chaith watched the exchange. “Do you understand them?” Khaly brought her

eyebrows together. “I mean, do you know what their saying?”

“I hear what you hear.” She half smirked. “I just fill in the blanks between the clicks and the squawks.”

He nodded, again peeking around the corner. Khaly readjusted. She was having a hard time balancing on one foot and ignoring the ever-increasing pain in her back.

“You okay?” He took a closer look at her face. “You’re a lot paler now than when we were at the warehouse.”

“I’ve been better.” She held onto him for balance.

“Did you hurt something other than your ankle?”

“I think so,” she said.

“What?”

“My back and ribs hurt a bit.”

Chaith looked down and across the street. Most of the area was abandoned. The intelligence reports they received stated that, when the main cleansing was done, the Guild soldiers had moved the remaining citizens into one central area. They only sent small roving patrols through the empty areas every five to six hours.

“We’re going to go to that building, over there.” He pointed across from them, and down one building.

“Why are we going to the library?”

“I need to get a better look at you.”

“It doesn’t look very operational.”

“We’re not going to check out any books.” He studied her. “Are you always this chatty on missions?”

“I’m not chatty.”

“Right, well, we have to move.” He took another look up and down the street, then picked her up and carried her in front of his chest. As she wrapped her arms around his neck she noticed the quick glance he gave Orantheio and Sumora, but said nothing.

He hurried across the street and toward the back of the building. Putting Khaly gently down he took the few steps to the back entrance, then looked back.

“Security lock?” she asked. He nodded, coming down to help her up. It took

Khaly only a second to open the lock and they were inside. “I guess technology wasn’t a skill you passed on the aptitude test.”

“Art,” he said.

When they reached the main area they saw the tables and chairs where visitors perused books, and Chaith put her down on one of the tables. The dust layering everything showed no one had been in there in many months.

“Art? Really, you’re an artist?”

Chaith rushed to the librarian’s desk, searching for a first aid kit and coming back with a tiny box. He had started to untie her boot when she grabbed his wrist.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said.

“We have to wrap your ankle. If it’s just a sprain then you’ll be able to walk on it.”

“And if it’s not then my boot is the only thing protecting the injury. We won’t be able to get back on.”

He paused, furrowing his brow, then started to retie her boot a little tighter, causing her to wince once again.

“Sorry. Now take off your jacket and shirt.”

“If we don’t have time for you to explain things, then I really don’t think we have much time for that.” She smiled.

“You’re funny. Come on.” He looked at his watch. “We’ve already missed the rendezvous by an hour. They’ll have moved to the second site, thinking we’ve been killed or captured.”

Khaly unbuttoned and removed her jacket, and Chaith moved in behind her to help. When she lifted her shirt the movement was painful, causing tears to well up in her eyes. She shuddered as she felt Chaith’s cold hands touch her back.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“How does it look?”

“You’ve got some bruising. Possibly bleeding going on in there.”

Khaly felt a warm sensation run through her body, then a tingling ran up her spine. Chaith was holding his hands to one spot on her right side, along her ribs where they attached to her spine. Orantheio jumped onto the table, putting his chin on her lap. Another warm sensation ran through her body. Then she felt

Chaith pull her shirt back down, covering her back up. He grabbed her coat, helping her to put it back on.

“That’s all I can do right now.” He looked around. “Where’s Sumora?”

“What do you mean, that’s all you can do?”

“Come on, we gotta go.”

“What about your hands?” she asked. “We should wrap them up.”

“What? My hands are fine.” He avoided eye contact.

“Chaith, I saw you cut your hand at the warehouse.”

He lifted up his hands up, showing her his palms. “See, I’m fine.” He turned away. “Sumora,” he called out.

A distant clicking came from the dark.

“She’s just exploring, she’ll catch up before we get out of the building.” He put his hand out and she took it. Khaly noticed the pain in her back wasn’t as bad. “What did you do?”

“What? When?”

“Chaith.”

“Not now.” He put her arm around his neck to help her to the door, Orantheio jumping down from the table with a loud thud. When they reached the door, Sumora was already waiting.

Chaith poked his head out the door and Khaly watched him closely. He was hiding something. She was positive she had seen him cut his hand, saw his blood. Whatever he was hiding it was something big. She needed to figure it out, and fast.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JAHALLAH BLINKED OPEN HER EYES. She was being dragged through trees and low bushes, and the warehouses and office building were a pile of rubble. To her far left she could see smoke rising into the sky from a different part of the city. Her ears were ringing and everything sounded muffled. She raised her hand to her ear, pulling it back to see blood. She looked up at who was pulling her.

Bancroft gripped her jacket collar, as she had done for him. His back was to her and he didn't see her wake up. Jahallah reached out, grabbing a small sapling to stop further movement. Bancroft immediately stopped, letting go of her jacket and kneeling next to her. He bled from his forehead, and the blood trickled down his temple.

"How do you feel?" he said.

"What?" she asked, shaking her head. His voice was muffled, and she could barely understand.

He pursed his lips as he assessed her injuries. Aside from the blood coming from her left ear she seemed to be all right. "Can you stand?" he asked. She furrowed her brow. Bancroft stood up and grabbed her hand, helping her off the ground.

She staggered, her head spinning at the sudden movement. He gripped her arm tightly to help her balance.

"How long have we been out?" She was unaware she was shouting until Bancroft gave a shushing motion. "Sorry," she shouted again. He furrowed his brow. *Sorry*, she mouthed.

He led them away from the buildings and to their assigned escape route. "I don't know how long we were out for. But there was this explosion, which woke me up. I was about to check on you when I noticed the area was filling up with Guild soldiers. They must have come to check on their supplies. I couldn't wake you up, so I started dragging you."

The two picked up their pace, getting as much distance between them and the destruction as quickly as possible. It was another five minutes before a second explosion from across town went off, stopping the two in their tracks.

Jahallah grabbed Bancroft's arm. "What was that?" Her tone was normal now that her ears were starting to clear.

"Algernon and his team," Bancroft said without taking his eyes off of the new, rising billows of smoke. "Come on, let's keep going. We're almost to the rendezvous."

"I didn't know they were going to blow up any buildings," Jahallah said to Bancroft's back. "I thought they were just gathering information."

"None of us were supposed to know," he called over his shoulder.

"Had another vision there, did ya, Vision Boy?"

"Something like that," he mumbled.

"How is it 'something like that'? Either you did or you didn't."

"I overheard my brother speaking with his team about taking out the buildings at the same time. It needed to be closely coordinated with the warehouse explosions."

"Wait, Tower City is being used as residences. Thousands of people live there."

"I know. I told Algernon I wasn't comfortable with the plan, because of that."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'It's war and people die in wars.'"

They continued in silence for some time. When the third and final explosion went off, they were already so far away they could barely hear it. It was almost four in the morning when they reached a clearing with a small campfire burning. Algernon and his four-man team were sitting around the fire, eating.

"Bancroft," he shouted, setting down his plate and moving toward him. "What happened?"

"How did you get here so fast?" Jahallah asked. "Your explosives went off after ours."

Algernon glanced at her as Bancroft pushed past, sitting down next to one of the other men. He handed Bancroft a plate and reached for a small medical bag. Algernon watched for a moment before responding to the question.

“We set the timers to go off after we were long gone from the area.” He grabbed Jahallah’s elbow and directed her to the fire as well.

She snatched the plate from Bancroft’s hand and started shoving the food in her mouth. Everyone but Bancroft looked at her.

“What? He wasn’t eating it.” She spoke around the food in her mouth.

As a member of Algernon’s team finished cleaning up Bancroft’s wounds, he handed him another plate of food. The other man moved over to Jahallah, cleaning her up as the remainder of the team started to pack up the camp.

“What are you doing? Khaly and Chaith aren’t here yet.” Bancroft stood.

Algernon looked at his watch. “We have to move to the other location. If they’re still alive they’ll meet us there. You know this. It was in our briefing of the mission.”

“They could be here any minute.”

“They’re an hour late. We have to move.”

With no apology they finished tearing down the camp and loaded up their packs, ready to move. Jahallah and Bancroft reluctantly followed after them.

Chaith carried Khaly on his back as they made their way down the empty street, away from the city. Orantheio was having too much trouble keeping up, so he took to the air with Sumora. Chaith refused to carry the dragon. Khaly was biting the collar of her shirt to prevent from screaming from the pain running through her body. With the adrenaline completely gone from her system, she felt every bounce and jarring movement.

Tears streamed down her face, and her breathing was labored. They had been running like this for twenty minutes. The dragons took notice of Khaly’s distress and dropped down in front of Chaith, forcing him to stop.

“What’s going on?” he whispered, looking around for the threat.

“What’s wrong?” Khaly breathed over his shoulder.

“I’m not sure. I don’t see anything. Come on, let’s go.” He had started moving forward when Sumora increased her size, hissing. Orantheio spit a small ball of fire in warning. “What the hell?” he said through gritted teeth. “They’re attacking me,” he shouted over his shoulder at Khaly.

“Put me down.” She tried to keep her voice even. He placed her down as

gently as he could, turning to face her. She had lost several shades of color, and was sweating and unsteady on her one foot. She kept the other lifted off the ground.

“Oh,” he said, cupping her face. “It’s me. I’m the one they’re protecting you from.”

Khaly gave a weak nod. “I’m not feeling too good, Chaith. I can’t keep going like this.”

“Okay, come here.” Gently, he picked her up and carried her in front of him. He went down a small alley and placed her on a back stoop, hiding her from the view of the street. “I’ll be right back.”

Orantheio climbed up next to her, placing his chin on her thigh, while Sumora kept watch several paces away. Chaith disappeared around the corner and didn’t return for some time. Khaly kept looking at her watch; the sun was starting to rise and she didn’t know how empty these streets were going to stay once the day started.

Khaly had her hand on Orantheio’s head, running her thumb up and down his short snout and between his eyes. Sumora moved in closer to Khaly, sitting on top of her good foot. A low humming came from down the street, putting all three on high alert. Orantheio and Sumora took up defensive positions, protecting Khaly. She did her best to hide behind what little bit of shelter she had.

“Khaly?” Chaith’s voice echoed down the empty alley.

She poked her head into view. “I’m here.” She grunted as she heaved herself up off the ground and onto her one good foot.

He rushed over and, without waiting, picked her up and carried her to the vehicle he had procured. Moving to the opposite side, he put her down and opened the door. Khaly stopped, her hand on the side of the vehicle, looking it up and down, her mouth open.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, holding the door open. “Get in.”

“I’ve just never…”

“Never what? Seen one before?”

Khaly pursed her lips. “I’ve seen them before. My father would get picked up in a company vehicle. I’ve just never ridden in one.” Clumsily, she got into the

passenger side. The dragons seemed just as hesitant, as they both looked anxiously up at her.

“Come on, kids, let’s go,” Chaith urged, looking down the street.

Khaly put her good foot back outside the car, twisting in the seat to reach for Sumora first, placing her on the floor at her feet. Chaith grabbed Orantheio, handing him to Khaly as she pulled her foot back in and readjusted in the seat. Orantheio immediately flattened himself to her, placing his chin under hers.

Chaith climbed into the driver’s side, pushing the button to start the motor.

“Do you know how to drive one of these?” Khaly asked as the car lurched forward.

“Just because I don’t own one doesn’t mean I don’t know how to drive it. Don’t you know how to drive?”

“I’m from Nylm Hills, Chaith. Our towns are not nearly large enough to run the programming for these things, but I have seen the schematics. It’s really very fascinating.”

Cars were only owned by the elite, running only in larger cities that used an intricate system of circuits throughout the streets. Although controlled by the driver, roads were powered by the city grid. Those outside the city were in rough condition, and not often driven. The transporters used for city-to-city travel ran on coilas, a toxic, corrosive substance that had long ago been banned for use within certain distances from populations.

The rest of the time people would use the oldest form of transportation: horse and carriage. The Underground, however, traveled mostly by foot.

“Get some rest,” Chaith said. “We should be able to get pretty close to our meeting place. We’ll have to walk a few kilometers, but it won’t be so bad—or not *as* bad.”

Khaly looked down at her feet, Sumora curled into a ball and resting her head on Khaly’s good foot. Her eyes were closed and Khaly could imagine the little dragon snoring. Orantheio was breathing heavily, his distress rising, eyes darting about the vehicle. Khaly wrapped her arms around him the best she could without causing herself more pain. She placed her hand on his head, covering his eyes, and leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

Chaith watched from the corner of his eye. The more she whispered to the fire

dragon the more his breathing slowed and steadied out until, finally, it was obvious he was sleeping. Khaly leaned her head back, turning it to look at Chaith.

“What?” she asked.

“What did you say?”

“Just put his mind at ease about the car. He’s never been in anything like this, not even in a horse carriage. It can be a little unnerving, you know.”

“I see.”

Khaly gave a weak smile, turning her head to face the window. She watched as the buildings and houses flew by, and it wasn’t long before her eyes shut.

EPILOGUE

Khaly laid on her bunk in their tent. Her ankle was badly sprained from the fall, but was now healing. She had also suffered several broken ribs, but nothing more than that. It took her and Chaith a couple days to catch up with the rest of the group, due to her injuries. Once back together, they all traveled to the main camp. She and Chaith didn't speak much, and she kept her distance. When she told Bancroft and Jahallah what she had found out, Bancroft attacked him. Jahallah said nothing, but was the nicest she had ever been to Khaly, tending to her every need.

They had been debriefed by Taithun, and Khaly was embarrassed she didn't have more information to give. The other two had come back with a great deal; explaining the devices they discovered in the warehouse, then the maps and other schematics on some of the floors they had checked in the building. When Khaly approached Taithun about what she had found out, it didn't surprise her to find Taithun already knew.

She discovered Algernon and a small team of men were the ones who blew up the buildings in Tower City, where many of the Guild were living. Camps throughout the city held suspected Elemental sympathizers. The Underground was working to release these people, and Taithun was confident the majority of the soldiers had been rounded up.

"So, do you think the war is over now?" Bancroft asked his brother. A small group had joined Khaly in their tent, which had become somewhat of a hot spot as of late. Many wanted the opportunity to get closer to the dragons, and there was a great deal of interest in her unfinished one.

Orantheio let out a squawk as one of the younger boys, who was barely out of his teens, grabbed his tail to pull him closer.

"Unless you want to smell like smoked BBQ, you should let him go and allow

him to come to you first," Khaly said, rising to her elbows to see what the commotion was about.

Everyone laughed as he released Orantheio, surrendering and apologizing to the dragon. Orantheio stalked away, going to sit on the opposite side of the firepit.

"Algernon…" Bancroft coaxed his brother away from the entertainment.

"What?"

"Do you think the war is over now?"

"It doesn't happen like that," Chaith said. "There's still a great deal of things we have to do. Finish rounding up the remainder of the soldiers. Rebuild."

"There will likely be smaller scrimmages to deal with, as well. The Guild isn't going to give up that easily," a woman about Chaith's age said, stepping into the tent and joining the group. She was stunning; her long white hair framed her face, and her silver eyes sparkled. "So this is where everyone is." She smiled, her eyes scanning the area and stopping on Chaith. She made her way over, shoving another aside to sit next to him.

Khaly met his eyes. She had grown to care for him deeply, but couldn't get passed his lying to her, so she had made the choice to separate from him. It shocked her to see he had moved on so quickly.

"The three of you will do some more training. Then, when Khaly's back on her feet, we'll send you out to one of the other continents," Algernon said.

"Why?" Bancroft asked.

"Just because the Guild has been defeated here, doesn't mean it's the same everywhere else," Khaly said. The others nodded in agreement.

"But Chahara died in that explosion, you said so yourself." He pointed at his brother.

"No, I said it is likely she did, but she wasn't working alone. She couldn't have been. We have to be sure those robots didn't get out of Feesia. They may have had more than what you found in the warehouse."

"So, it's not over then."

"Don't be such a child, Bancroft," Jahallah said. "Of course, it's not over."

Continue following Khaly and her family on their adventures. *Mechanical*

Dragons: Spirit can be found here:
https://www.bobbischemerhornauthor.ca/spirit.html

MECHANICAL DRAGONS: SPIRIT

Chapter One

The tent was full of laughter and excited conversation. Reports were coming in that the Guild was leaving Feesia. The mass destruction from Khaly and her group had been enough to drive them out.

“The three of you will do some more training and, when Khaly is back on her feet, we’ll send you out to one of the other continents,” Algernon said.

“Why?” Bancroft asked.

“Just because the Guild has been defeated here doesn’t mean it’s the same everywhere else,” Khaly said. The others nodded.

“But Chahara died in the explosion, you said so yourself.” He pointed at his brother.

“No, I said it is *likely* she did, but she wasn’t working alone. She couldn’t have been. We have to be sure those robots didn’t get out of Feesia.”

“So, it’s not over then.”

“Don’t be a moron, Bancroft,” Jahallah said. “Of course it’s not over.” Khaly gave her a nudge in the back. Jahallah shrugged.

“I’m excited to see what kind of dragon Khaly’s going to bring to life this time.” Oalina smiled as she brushed her long hair off her shoulder and gently touched Chaith’s bicep. Khaly gritted her teeth at the action.

She also wasn’t sure if bringing another to life was something she intended on doing. The two she already had were a handful.

One of the men sitting on the couch picked up the body of the unfinished dragon.

“Did somebody say you can touch that?” Jahallah said, narrowing her eyes. He slowly put it back down, and Khaly tried to conceal a smile.

Her eyes swept the room, catching Chaith watching her. His gaze steady, he

refused to look away. Khaly's heart skipped a beat and she swallowed hard.

"Ah, Khaly?" Bancroft's voice came from the other end of the tent, drawing everyone's attention.

Khaly craned her neck to get a better view. Sumora was perched precariously on the arm of the chair, watching him. Even though she spent a great deal of time protecting Bancroft before he learned to use his active gift, she would still stare at him for no other reason than to intimidate.

"Sumora." Khaly sighed. The room fell silent, no one knowing what to expect. The dragons spent little time around others and preferred to be left alone. Both Sumora and Orantheio spat either water or fire if approached, or if someone moved too quickly in their presence.

The water dragon kept a steady gaze on Bancroft. She smacked her lips.

"Do you have something in your pocket?" Jahallah asked.

Bancroft shook his head. "Khaly, do something."

"Sumora, leave him alone," Khaly said again, this time getting up on her elbows. The motion caused her to wince. Her ribs were still healing from her fall in the warehouse two weeks prior.

Sumora clicked at her.

"Don't talk back. Get down."

Sumora refused to move, turning back to Bancroft narrowing her eyes. Her behavior was odd, a little unnerving. The tension in the room grew, and no one dared to move or breathe. Sumora appeared to grow as she took a defensive stance. Orantheio turned toward Bancroft and set a steady gaze upon him.

"Khaly," he said through gritted teeth, the fear in his voice rising.

People started to get up from their seats, the light atmosphere gone.

"Nobody move." Khaly tried to keep her voice low, so as not to startle the now visibly agitated dragons. Pulling herself into a seated position she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Jahallah stood up slowly, offering Khaly her arm so she could easier get off the bed. "Orantheio, come here."

He didn't move or respond. Khaly swallowed; never had they defied her this way. Carefully she crossed the tent, hobbling on her bad ankle and holding her ribs.

"Sumora." Her voice was gentle and Sumora clicked back at her, but she never

took her eyes off Bancroft. Khaly eased closer and stepped in front of Orantheio, knowing he wouldn't spit fire at her.

Khaly took one last step toward Bancroft, reached out for Sumora, then froze. She realized Sumora wasn't watching Bancroft at all. There was something, or someone, on the other side of the tent. The hairs on her arms stood on end and a shiver ran down her spine. Khaly made eye contact with Bancroft and could see he understood immediately. He was never in danger from the dragons; Sumora was only doing what she had been doing for months: protecting him—protecting all of them.

"What's going on?" Oalina asked, causing everyone to jump.

Bancroft glared in her direction, bringing a finger up to shush her. Khaly straightened, widening her stance, and glanced over her shoulder. Jahallah moved to her side. Bancroft carefully slid from the chair and Orantheio eased through Khaly's legs, skulking toward the back of the tent. Khaly glanced over her other shoulder and saw Chaith give a silent command to everyone in the room.

They all eased from their seats and made for the door. Oalina was the last to leave.

A series of shouts and explosions came from the camp, which for a second shifted Khaly's attention, but then came instantly back when three men cut through the tent. They were caught off guard when confronted by Khaly and her family, but still they charged.

Sumora sprayed boiling water into their eyes, and Orantheio spat flames. In a flash Jahallah and Bancroft were on two of the men, but it took all Khaly had to remain standing. The third came at her, wielding a short sword, but her mind was so fuzzy she couldn't throw up any defense. Orantheio spat blue flames, but they didn't seem to slow her attacker. Khaly staggered back and felt something fly past her ear. A knife had found a home in the man's neck and he dropped instantly. Chaith was immediately by her side, wrapping his arm around her waist.

"I got ya. It's okay. You're okay."

"What about Oalina? Is she going to be okay with this?" she asked. Bancroft and Jahallah stood heaving for breath.

“Really? You want to do this now?” Chaith was exasperated, yet couldn’t help but smile.

Khaly looked at the other men on the floor.

“Dead,” Bancroft said.

There came several more explosions, rattling the tent.

“What the hell is going on?” Bancroft asked, shoving his feet into his shoes.

“What do you think? Come on.” Jahallah ran out of the tent.

“Khaly—”

“Go. They need everyone they can get.”

Bancroft chased Jahallah. Grabbing her bag from the floor, Khaly started shoving the unfinished dragon and its parts into it.

“What are you doing?” Chaith had not left her side.

“I’m not leaving this behind. I find it odd—” She was interrupted by a loud squawk followed by an ear-splitting scream. “Don’t you find it odd they came to our tent first? That the instant they broke through they attacked out there as well?”

He shook his head, obviously confused, but said nothing. Instead, he helped her finish packing. Khaly pulled on her boots, gritting her teeth as one tightened around her sprained ankle. With the dragons on his heels, Chaith picked her up and carried her into the camp. Many of the tents were on fire, and it was mere seconds before another fire bomb came at them. Chaith dropped Khaly to the ground and threw up a shield, deflecting the bomb so it hit the tent instead.

As he picked her back up she scanned the area and spotted Jahallah and Bancroft. Bancroft stood in front of Jahallah, protecting her with his shield as she raised the ground around the intruders and pulled them into the earth. With one arm, Chaith held Khaly tight as he threw out one defense after another. The young man who had grabbed Orantheio’s tail screamed as his heart was ripped from his body. Khaly remembered the conversations they had about his affinity for mechanics, how he wanted to go to the Academy after his aptitude tests. He was so young with so much potential and now he was gone, lost forever and rage grew inside Khaly. The image reminded her of her own father, sitting at their table, his heart in front of him.

Grabbing Chaith’s hand she pulled herself free, steadied her stance, and threw

a wall of flames in front of the attacker. She advanced on him as she raised the ground up, wrapping roots around his ankles. He struggled, unsure of what to do. With each step Khaly took she attacked with a different Elemental. All her anger and betrayal she had felt during the last year was built up inside. She closed her eyes and tilted her face to the sky. Clouds formed above and fighters on both sides of the battle froze, watching the power Khaly was demonstrating.

Opening her eyes, she locked her gaze with his as he was struck with a bolt of lightning. He turned to ash in seconds, but there was no smell of burning flesh. There was nothing left to smell.

Without hesitation, Khaly turned her attention to the rest of the intruders. Those remaining backed up and ran away.

Khaly doubled over, hands on her knees, and retched. Her family, and Chaith, ran to her side, and she looked up at Bancroft.

“What the hell *wasthat*?” She then collapsed, unconscious.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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